ABSTRACT

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THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: BLACK WOMEN'S NARRATIVE OF SELF-MADE CONFINEMENT AND SELF-SELECTED EXILE

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This study examines the kinship between the female slave narrative and the writing of the female political prisoner during the Black Power Movement. The notion of imprisonment and escape has played an important role in the genre of African American Autobiography since its beginnings in the slavery era. To sustain this premise, this work will employ comparative analysis, which explores the constructional similarities between Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). This comparative analysis demonstrates that *Autobiography* is like *Incidents* in that Jacobs wrote a liberatory autobiographical text that offers mental emancipation despite her status of physical enslavement. The comparative analysis will

reveal the commonality in the objectives of the struggle for survival presented in the slave narrative and the memoir of the political prisoner. Although the accounts are from two different eras, the examination will illuminate the verity that the captives give to those who are still in bondage and desperately searching for manumission. The comparison of the slave narrative and the autobiography of the political prisoner has not been widely explored in academia. In addition, the memoir of the African American woman prisoner has not been canonized as that of the woman's slave narrative. Furthermore, the conclusion drawn from this research demonstrates that the political prisoner's memoir is a continuation of the same redemptive objective that is offered through the slave narrative. Based on this research, it will be discovered that other slave narratives and political prisoner memoirs have similar themes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the organizational and structural similarities between Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). Whereas Jacobs's narrative has traditionally been compared to other works of the nineteenth century, this dissertation provides a comparative analysis that places Jacobs' *Incidents* in conversation with Shakur's *An Autobiography*, a more contemporary work. Its analysis emphasizes the remarkable reach of Jacobs's literary strategy of allegory. *Incidents* offers an allegory for the events preceding the Civil Rights Movement. More specially, it provides a foreshadowing of the struggle for survival for African Americans in the 20th century, which is the desire for people of color to be free from the oppressions that place African Americans in an unspoken cast system which leads to incarceration of the mind *and* body. Considering the structural similarities between *Incidents* and *An Autobiography*, the former narrative seems to have inspired the latter one in fundamental ways. More specifically, literary structure is the way in which a piece of writing is organized. *Incidents* and *Autobiography* both have literary structure that includes organizational patterns that are descriptive in providing instructions on how to accomplish the task of mental and physical liberation without permission or acceptance from the oppressor. Also, both texts are written chronologically, which presents a sequence of events that takes the reader

through a sequence of events that identify the authors' struggle for survival through the lens of a political revolutionary, who writes from a physical position of bondage. This dissertation discusses those fundamentals and points out that the works' structural kinship has not been a topic of discussion in academic literature on African American autobiographical writings.

Additionally, this dissertation argues that the lived experiences of Jacobs and Shakur, as represented in their works respectively, are similar. In this view, Jacobs's *Incidents* demonstrates a struggle for survival that is analogous to the struggle demonstrated in Shakur's *An Autobiography*. While both writers' experiences testify of their individual tragedies, this dissertation argues that these experiences are also ubiquitous: they are indicative, on some level, of most African American women's experiences. Thus, this dissertation reads the aforementioned works as feminist manifestos, as manuals for female survival that are contemporarily relevant. This study also argues that Jacobs and Shakur were prisoners who transmute into political prisoners by manipulating their perspective of freedom through self-confinement and self-selected exile. In this research, a political prisoner is defined as a person who lives in two worlds: a world of spiritual or mental freedom and one of physical or nonspiritual bondage. Interestingly, both women's prison experiences provide an opportunity to explore the limitations of mental freedom. Additionally, their imprisonment demonstrates the importance of action, the necessity for one to do something in order to acquire freedom. Freedom, in this sense, refers to a liberation of mind and of body—the sort of freedom that allows a person to think and move as he or she desires.

Lastly, this dissertation argues that Jacobs and Shakur, as demonstrated in their respective works, come to the realization that mental freedom is of very little value when one's body is bond—that freedom is not achieved until one has mental *and* physical liberation. Considering their realizations, Jacobs's and Shakur's texts argue for a strategy of freedom that emphasizes the utility and import of physical freedom. In this way, these women's freedom narratives show that complete liberation, that *complete* freedom, is not merely dependent upon a person's mental outlook, but also requires thoughtful, deliberate action.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Paulo Freire summarizes the notion that obtaining freedom necessitates actions. He explains that "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift."[1] He continues:

> Freedom must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. And conquest is not by the submission to the limited boundaries of America; it is simply by revolutionizing with a structured plan to permanently be freed both literally *and* emphasis added] figuratively.[2]

Both Jacobs and Shakur share Freire's outlook on freedom in that neither woman gained physical independence with the complete autonomy that was not defined by the oppressor's definition of freedom. Moreover, Jacobs and Shakur created a place of liberation in an isolated space that is separate from the masses, which highlights the importance of individual action in one's quest for freedom. Considering this

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1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 21.

2. Ibid.

demonstration, this dissertation argues that Jacobs and Shakur's autobiographical narratives evince a definition of freedom that includes the import of physical liberation.

Purpose of the Study

Although this dissertation offers a unique, comparative analysis of *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, which focuses on the aforementioned topics, several well-established ideas undergird its interpretive approach. Interpretive research is a paradigm that is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular nor objective; however, it is shaped by human experiences which is defined as ontology. Thus, interpretive research is applied to *Incidents* and *Autobiography* as this concept is best studied within a socio-historic context by investigating Jacobs and Shakur's interpretations through the study of epistemology, which is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from the writer's opinion. Additionally, narrative research is employed to demonstrate the kinship between *Incidents* and *Autobiography* through linking the similarities of the struggle for survival between the enslaved and the political prisoner, as narrative research focuses on the lives of Jacobs and Shakur as told through their own stories. Moreover, this comparative analysis seeks to take the reader on a transformative journey of literary metamorphosis via autobiographical activism from enslavement to political imprisonment. During this transformation, Jacobs makes a literary call for African Americans to have critical consciousness, which requires one to have an in-depth understanding of reality and intentionally become an active participant in creating their own destiny despite historical facts. More specifically, research suggests that "critical consciousness is the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the

commitment to take action against these systems."[3] Shakur takes action by completing the last phase of critical consciousness in answering Jacobs's call by recognizing the oppressive reality in the struggle for survival, while refusing to accept the unjust plight that Blacks face in seeking mental and physical freedom. Additionally, Shakur's literary activism, political principles, and self-selected exile is a guide to obtain a type of freedom that does not request permission from the oppressor.

Furthermore, this research highlights the difference between the term "enslaved" versus the idiom, "slave." It is important to note that the word slave is defined as a person who is legally owned as the property of another person. To identify a human as property is obviously problematic and contradictory, as property does not have rights, authority, or autonomy. Thus, referring to displaced Africans who were involuntarily forced into servitude as "slaves" is unconsciously identifying the descents of emperors as human chattel.

Like Diana Ramey Berry's *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*, this work attempts to debunk the term "slave" by replacing it with the phrase "enslaved Africans." Similar to Jacobs writing the first autobiographical female enslaved narrative, Berry wrote the first text to explore the economic value of enslaved men, women, and children from conception until death. Instead of focusing on "the market" as her central argument, Berry centers her work on the thoughts, emotions, and ideas of enslaved people. Furthermore, she does not only document an economic history of enslavement, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*

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3. Matthew Diemer, Luke Rapa, and Catalina Park and Justin Perry, "Development and Validation of a Critical Consciousness Scale," *Youth & Society* 49, no. 4 (2017): 1-23.

is also "an intellectual history of enslaved people's thoughts, expressions, feelings, and reactions to their own commodification."[4] While Dr. Stephanie Evans's Black Women Studies Booklist[5] offers other texts that refer to the phrase "enslaved Africans," Berry's work is of special interest for this dissertation as she uses innovative research including medical and plantation records, she turned to cemeteries, published and unpublished slave narratives.[6]

As identified in other texts from the *BWST Booklist* (i.e. *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland*; *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*; *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*), the term "enslaved African" restores and reestablishes humanity that was extracted from those who were captured and forced into servitude as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Furthermore, this document models Berry's pioneering work by crafting the expression "Captive African American Narrative"[7] as another idiom to replace the phrase slave narrative. While the term is being challenged, the axiom slave

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4. Alexandra J. Finley, "Review of The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation," review of *The Journal of the Civil War Era* by Daina Ramey Berry, 8, no. 1 (March 2018): 132-134. doi:10.1353/cwe.2018.0006.

5. The Black Women Studies Booklist (BWST) connects foundational texts of critical race and gender scholarship to newer publications. This comprehensive bibliography identifies long-term trends and places recent contributions in historical context.

6. Stephanie Y. Evans, *The Black Women's Studies Booklist: Emergent Themes in Critical Race and Gender Research*, accessed September 06, 2019, https://bwstbooklist.net/.

7. Captive African American Narrative (CAAN) is a term that was coined to reidentify what is traditionally known as slave narratives. CAAN acknowledges the author of the narrative as enslaved, which is one who is physically in bondage but mentally free. Rather than referring to them as slaves; hence, suggesting that they are mentally and physically detained human property that does not have the intellectual capacity to read or write. Thus, making it impossible to write an autobiographical text that is worthy of having its own genre.

narrative is defined as a historical source that documents slave life primarily in the American South from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. Referring to the enslaved African's autobiography as the Captive African American Narrative (CAAN) challenges the reader to reconsider accepting the phrase "slave narrative" as a decorous description of the enslaved autobiography. Moreover, CAAN calls for the establishment of an alternative canon or the expansion of the existing one.

Additionally, this work offers criticism on the African American literary tradition, regarding the significance of the CAAN, which informs this study's argumentation. In his initial introduction to the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues for the narratives' importance. In *Norton* (also see *The Signifying Monkey*), Gates explains that slave narratives, which were first conceived as anti-slavery propaganda during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provide the very first instances of literary formation: a process whereby the earliest writers used common organizational techniques, themes, and narratologies when writing their narratives.[8] For Gates, the *Trope of the Talking Book* is one of the canon's most salient initial symbols, a figure the tradition's early writers used to comment on their "coming into" the word. For other critics, like Houston Baker Jr., such symbols demonstrate recursive qualities that are at the heart of any literary tradition but are especially important in African American literature.

Gates's notion, that the earliest writers read each other's works and that these writers commented on each other's literary symbols, not only shows the sort of

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8. Henry Louis Gates, and Nellie Y. McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), 12-15.

sophisticated dialogism that was evident in the tradition's earliest works but it also demonstrates a kind of intentionality on the part of the writers to converse with each other literarily. While it might be a hard thing to say for certain that Jacobs's *Incidents* serves as a "speakerly text" for Shakur's *Autobiography*, the latter work includes and revises many tropes,[9] which were first introduced into the canon of African American women's writing by Jacobs. For example, Jacobs alludes to race, gender, and sexuality as overlapping.

Another idea undergirding this dissertation, which is not necessarily germane to it, is the notion that the enslave narratives are, themselves, existential acts. In "Introduction: Talking Books," Henry Louis Gates hints toward this notion when he remarks upon the origins of the African American literary tradition. Gates writes:

> The Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient being, that they could, indeed, write… Writing, many philosophers argued in the Enlightenment, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius," the visible sign of reason itself… Eighteenth-century European writers privileged writing… as the principle measure of the Africans' humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being.[10]

Although Gates, in the preceding extraction, does not directly mention the slave narratives, it is easy to see how the slave narratives implicitly and explicitly respond to notions of dehumanization.

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9. A literary trope is the use of figurative language, via word, phrase or an image, for artistic effect such as using a figure of speech. The word trope has also come to be used for describing commonly recurring literary and rhetorical devices, motifs or clichés in creative works.

10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith, "Introduction: Talking Books," *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Vol. 1,* rev. ed. (New York: Norton and Co., 2014), XXXV - XLI.

By viewing Shakur's *Autobiography* as an extension of the enslave narrative, this dissertation seeks to point out that these two genres of writing—the autobiography and the Captive African American Narrative—generally, and that *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, specifically, attempt to provide existential affirmations of the writers' humanity. In this way, Jacob's *Incidents* is similar to Shakur's *Autobiography* at the work's deepest levels. Much like the autobiographies of Black[11] political prisoners published during the 1970s, enslaved Africans wrote narratives to testify of the horrors of America's peculiarly oppressive institutions. In both genres, the writers intended to "write themselves out of slavery," although the political prisoners were not "enslaved" in a traditional sense.[12]

This notwithstanding, the autobiographies of political prisoners, like the CAANs demonstrate a universally human longing to be free and un-oppressed. In this way, these works offer a transcendent commentary on the human condition, the kind of commentary that says something about the dialectal "self" and the ever-present, often menacing, "other." Said differently, the autobiographies of political prisoners and the narratives of enslaved Africans testify of oppressions unique to African persons living in the United States, but they also say something about the oppressing "other," who was often white and male. By testifying of both things, these narratives comment on the limits of human charity and civility. Yet, these works caution readers not to indiscriminately view

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11. Black will be used interchangeably with African American. Given the history of names imposed on groups from the African Diaspora, i.e. colored, nigger, negro, it is important that, whether one identifies as Black, African, African America, or Other, one is able to name oneself and reclaim the power of voice and identity. The word is capitalized to emphasize its cultural and political connotations.

12. Henry Louis Gates, and Nellie Y. McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), 12.

whiteness as the enemy of blackness. Instead, these works offer a dialogism that urges readers to look for the traits of the "other" inside of the "self." In so doing, these narratives evince the need to always escape—and, perhaps, continually to crucify afresh—the lurking limits of incivility that perpetually reside in all humans, in any given historical moment. In this way, the works are brilliantly existential; they are exquisite meditations on survival and our shared humanness.

In one sense, it is not very hard to see how the enslaved narratives are documents of survival. Between 1760 and 1860, approximately seventy slave narratives were published in America and England. These narratives exposed the nature of slavery—and the nature of white consciousness itself. CAANs were first-person accounts of the brutal occurrences that attempted to strip Africans of their authentic culture, language, resources, identity, *and* their right to an education. Indeed, these narratives provide detail of the horrors of the so-called "peculiar institution."

Instead of focusing on the horrors of those experiences, scholars like Dr. Bethany Skaggs have pointed out that white abolitionists wrote some of these narratives, although the stories were undoubtedly from the enslaved African Americans who were brave enough to disclose their experiences.[13] With critics' definition of autobiography as unquestionably male, white and Western, Black women's autobiographical writings were misidentified and dismissed.

It is important to point out that most discussions regarding the amanuensis are implicitly racist. This notion is worth bringing up at this juncture because it might be

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13. Bethany Latham Skaggs, "I Will Be Heard: Prominent Abolitionists," *Reference Reviews* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 55, https://doi:10.1108/09504120610655691.

helpful to debunk certain notions regarding the authorship of Jacobs's narrative before it demonstrates an extreme bias on the parts of readers who question the authenticity of the narrative. While abolitionists may have written some of the narratives, the enslaved narrators had specific intentions for the purpose of the narrative. This study will demonstrate that the narratives were written in attempt to establish three themes: the enslaved redeem their humanity; prove that the enslaved could be reliable truth-tellers of their own experience; and that the pen (writing) became an instrument of liberation when it was not offered in society.

Much like Jacobs's autobiography was a weapon in the political war against slavery, Shakur's work is that of a racial revolutionary who wrote a distinctive autobiography during her incarceration. She is an example of the political prisoner whose voice was meant to be silenced as she was imprisoned and stripped of rights as a free citizen i.e. freedom of speech. Political prisoners are notable revolutionaries who included their incarceration experience in their autobiography as a medium to liberate those who were seemingly free but mentally imprisoned by the limitations and oppressions of society. Like slavery, prison is designed to silence and suppress; however, the noted dignitaries include imprisoned incidents in their memoir to demonstrate the power of a *liberated* African American mind despite physical detainment. These autobiographies demonstrate the brilliance of the oppressed ability to exploit universal writing standards; while this doctrine was designed to subjugate and suppress blacks, these captives amend *and* employ the European writing standards for mental emancipation.

For many who were enslaved, the ability to read and write meant freedom—if not actual, physical freedom, then intellectual freedom—to maintain relationships amongst family members separated by the slave trade. Like *Incidents,* other powerful published narratives exposed the evils of slavery. For those who managed to become literate and escape to freedom, the ability to write would spark the growth of a powerful genre of literature: The Captive African American Narrative. For the abolitionist movement, narratives from the enslaved would become tremendously effective weapons in attacking the institution of slavery. Despite the danger of physical punishment and the threat of capture for the authors of the narratives, these men and women took great risks to empower themselves, and in some cases, achieved freedom.

Like the benefit of the CAAN, the autobiography of the political prisoner provides an insight and a guide for mental liberation. These writings are for those who live in the "free world," attempting to avoid being among the increasing population of incarcerated African Americans. The political prisoner lives in both worlds: the place in which people are mentally free and another space where people are physically in bondage. Their writing heightens the consciousness of those who are still blinded by the deceptions and manipulations from the invisible hand of oppression. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the kinship between the slave narrative and the writing of the political prisoner during the Black Arts Movement. To further evince this parallel, this research will exegete the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* and Assata Shakur's memoir, *Assata: An Autobiography.* As this comparable analysis is highlighted, perhaps a new era of marginalized writings will be birthed with the intent of decreasing the incarcerated population by liberating the mind of

those who are seemingly trapped by the invisible hand of the social system that oppresses African Americans.

Assumptions

This research presents two assumptions. First, I hypothesize that the liberating voice from the slave narrative is parallel to the writing of the political prisoner. The assumption that guides this research suggests that the political prisoner's memoir is a continuation of the same redemptive objective that is offered through the slave narrative. More specifically, this redemption is the renewing, reclaiming, and reshaping of the enslaved mind that was intended to be in captivity with the body.

Second, I theorize that if similar writings were canonized and applied to modern day society, perhaps they could transform the Black criminal mentality into a Black revolutionary mentality, empowering blacks to revolt against social traps that result in imprisonment, while creating new identities that debunk negative identities. This hypothesis is supported by the Black Feminist perspective that analyzes the experiences Black women share through narrative. This theoretical and methodological approach offers a pathway for education and research communities to account for the expansive possibilities that Black feminism has for theorizing the lives of black women. Black feminist thought cannot challenge race, gender, and class oppression without empowering African-American women. "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling

their story."[14] The practice of African American autobiography functions to allow traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups, such as women and people of color, to reclaim their voices. In addition, by laying claim to personal Narrative (i.e. the telling of one's own story), oppressed peoples are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence, and thus remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society has relegated them.

As a literature of resistance, confessional narratives by Black folks were didactic. More than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by Black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guides, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another. Even as the number of novels published by black women increase, this writing cannot be either a substitute for theory or for autobiographical narrative.[15] This work highlights the fact that radical Black women need to tell their personal stories, as it is important to continue documenting lived experiences in the struggle for survival. This second assumption is influenced by the idea that while the political prisoner is incarcerated, they can radically influence and transform those who are physically "free."

Although the prisoners are physically confined, the political prisoner functions as the protector for blacks who are exposed to the outside world, more specifically, the prisoner who revolutionizes through autobiographical text. Shakur's autobiography can

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14. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, quoting Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 65.

15. bell hooks, *Black looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43-46.

mentally emancipate those who are physically "free" because this text speaks to the lives of those who revolted against the rules of society designed to keep Blacks bound, at the bottom of every social class. Additionally, her narrative reveals the true history of how the political prisoner became mentally liberated despite their physical constraints.

Statement of Problem

Many questions arise when reviewing the authenticity of enslaved narratives. Research suggests that the validity of autobiographies by the enslaved Africans in the United Statements constitutes to be one of the most controversial subjects in American history.[16] Throughout much of the twentieth century, historians have debated various interpretations of enslavement in the United States. However, many of the scholars' viewpoints have neglected to seriously consider the documented records of the enslaved in their research. Nearly every social class studied in African American history has roots cultivated through the examination of enslavement. Unfortunately, in the past, several historians have disregarded and marginalized the testimony of the enslaved African. But more recently, some consideration is given to a value placed on the enslaved narratives as historical documents for what the texts reveal about enslavement. Hence, it is problematic that scholars have omitted and ostracized the significance of enslaved narratives, as they have rejected the enslaved testimonies as unreliable sources for historical research.

This research seeks to underscore the fact that the CAAN is an authentic portrayal of enslavement, written by the former enslaved as it documents factual experiences. This

16. Andrews, William L., *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 23-29.

fact alone was inconceivable for many white readers (and is still challenged by modern day scholars), who question how the former enslaved could write at all, let alone write fluently and cogently. In fact, to reaffirm the authenticity, Harriet Jacobs's memoir is subtitled, "Written by Herself." Moreover, many historians believed that Lydia Maria Child, a white American abolitionist, wrote the narrative until it was proved in the 1980s that the events related were real and Jacobs was the true author. This study will echo this notion of authenticity while concentrating on the influence of place and space in the Black woman's narrative for survival.

Additionally, this work will speak to the fact that the memoir of the African American woman prisoner is not canonized like that of the enslaved woman's narrative. A comparison between the two could potentially establish an independent literary genre in attempt to add to the political awakening for people of African descent.

Rationale

African American autobiography was birthed through the eminent accounts of enslaved narratives. The elucidation of *Autobiography* and *Incidents* explore the intensities and denomination that indisputably qualifies Black autobiography to be canonical literature. Moreover, these works demonstrate Black women's commitment to resistance by employing space and place as a part of their activism in autobiography. While there are hundreds of enlightening Black women's narratives, the rationale for selecting *Incidents* and *Autobiography* is one autobiography written during the nineteenth and one written during twentieth century from a confined African American woman who experiences imprisonment, motherhood, and escape into self-selected exile. The process

for selecting the enslaved narrative included searching through "North American Slave Narratives" listed on the website *Documenting the American South* (DAS). DAS is a an electronic publishing program that provides public access to primary source materials that includes nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts, with large numbers of autobiographies, biographies, essays, travel accounts, poetry, diaries, letters, and memoirs.[17] More specifically, "North American Slave Narratives" catalogue books and articles that document the individual and collective story of African Americans struggling for freedom and human rights in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. This list consists of three hundred-six published enslaved narratives written during the nineteenth century, of these accounts thirty-three were written between 1850-1859, but only sixteen were written by women. The texts are as follows: *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (1850); *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860); *Incidents in the Life of a Slave* (1861); *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861); *Memoir of Old Elizabeth* (1863); *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1864); *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1868); *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick, of Virginia* (1869); *The History of the Carolina Twins, Told in "Their Own Peculiar Way" By "One of Them* (1869); *Silvia Dubois, (now 116 years old): a Biografy of the Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Fredom. Ed. Cornelius Wilson Larison* (1883); *Elizabeth, a Colored Minister of the Gospel Born in Slavery* (1889); *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, a Slave Woman* (1889);

17. "North American Slave Narratives," *Documenting the American South*, accessed September 7, 2019, http://docsouth.unc.edu/.

The House of Bondage (1890); *Struggles for Freedom* (1891); *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith* (1893); and *A Slave Girl's Story. Being the Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* (1898).

Similar to Jacobs, Sojourner Truth's narrative takes the reader through her journey of enslavement to escape. Another parallel is that Truth is a mother who absconds with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. While there are obvious similarities within *Incidents* and *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave*, the difference between the narratives is that Truth escaped but did not choose self-selected exile in her struggle for freedom. Also, the central theme for her narrative is the abolition of slavery by using religion to debunk slavery, while helping to recruit Black troops for the Union Army.[18] Although Truth's narrative did not meet the criteria for the rationale of this work, her narrative is equally significant to the canonical contribution towards Black women writing, as she sponsored prison reform, property rights and universal suffrage.

Much like the search to select the enslaved narrative, the choice for the political prisoner memoir was extensive, thorough and completed with diligence. *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* and "Black Women's Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons" were the primary sources used to identify the prison narratives which met the noted criteria for this research. Breea C. Willingham's "Black Women's Prison Narratives" is particularly important to this work because she describes the meaning of incarceration for African American women as

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18. Mabee Carleton, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (NY: New York University Press, 1993).

depicted in the narratives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women. Also, similar to conceptual framework for this research, Williams's article uses Black feminist thought as the primary theoretical context to provide the relevant context for understanding the race, sexual, and gender oppressions that contribute to African American women's experiences with imprisonment.[19] The premise of this article is that Black women's prison narratives offer a unique insight into interlocking patterns of oppression that contribute to their incarceration, and how discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality extends into prison. Williams asserts that Black women prison narratives illustrate a distinctive form of activism and a continued struggle for freedom. Additionally, she refers to Collins's explanation of the ways in which Black feminism is significant in Black women's prison narratives:

> black women's prison literature constitutes a part of this active black feminism because it seeks to respond to race, gender, and sexual oppressions of black women, as well as address political and social topics. Therefore, some of the literature produced by black female inmates deserves to be included in the larger critical discourse on black women's literature because incarcerated black women are able to reflect their own black feminist standpoint through writing when they find, represent, and liberate themselves through the written word. The emerging black women's literature community, according to Collins, offers another 'safe space' where black women can articulate a self-defined standpoint. Black women's prison literature is arguably creating another safe space, giving the inmates a vessel through which to express their new found voice within a collective environment.[20]

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19. Breea C. Willingham, "Black Women's Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons," *Critical Survey* 23, no. 3 (January 2011): 7, https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230305.

20. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 110. Collins explains that safe spaces were 'safe' because they 'represented places where black women could freely examine issues that concerned all black women. Such spaces become less safe if shared by those who were not black and female'. These spaces 'were never meant to be a way of life. Instead, they constitute one mechanism among many designed to foster black women's empowerment and enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects' (110).

In "Black Women's Prison Narrative," Williams notes ten women who wrote about women prison narratives. Of the ten, four are memoirs by African American women written in the twentieth century. The four autobiographies include *Angela Davis: An Autobiography (*1974), *Assata: An Autobiography*, *Joyce Ann Brown: Justice Denied* (1990), and *Laughing in the Dark: From Colored Girl to Woman of Color – A Journey from Prison to Power* (1995). Each text is similar in that the author's speak to political injustices and oppressions of race, sex, and gender, which contribute to African American women's experiences during imprisonment.

Angela Davis's *An Autobiography* is a contender for the political prisoner narrative selection as she writes about the unjust experiences she endures while trying to become a voice for the elimination of oppression in the United States. Like Shakur, Davis uses narrative as a device to attend to systemic racial and political problems in a way that is unapologetically vindicating her deep ties to communist thought. More specifically, in 1969, Davis is hired by UCLA as an assistant professor in the philosophy department but is dismissed after her association to the Communist Party is made public. The following year, she becomes active in a movement to improve inmates' prison conditions. This effort culminated with the creation of a campaign to free three African American male prisoners (George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette) who were apart of the Black Panther Party and identified themselves as the Soledad Brothers. This event leads to Davis being implicated in a criminal effort to free the Soledad Brothers later that year, which ends with the death of a judge and one of the Soledad brothers. After the shooting during the trial, the authorities raid Davis's possessions, and discover guns which are registered in her name. Shortly after the raid, Davis absconds, avoiding arrest, but is

placed on the FBI's most wanted list. Though Davis attempts self-selected exile, she is captured in New York in 1972, but acquitted after a dreary trial.[21] Though Davis's autobiography is compelling and she can be identified as a political prisoner, she does not meet the criteria for this research because she does not remain in self-selected exile, nor is she a mother.

Though Joyce Ann Brown's *Joyce Ann Brown: Justice Denied* is groundbreaking and speaks to the ills of oppression, this memoir does not meet the criteria for this research as she does not commit to self-selected exile. However, she documents how she is convicted of aggravated robbery of a fur store in Dallas, Texas, though she worked across town and several co-workers testify that she is at work during the commission of the robbery.[22] As a result, Brown is wrongly accused and imprisoned for a crime she did not commit. Brown spends more than nine years in the Texas Department of Corrections working to secure her release. Her memoir details prison life, which is life without family and her six children. Additionally, Brown offers great detail of what it is like for a Black woman to lose her freedom as a result of the systemic oppressions that suggest that people of African descent are guilty until proven innocent.

Like Davis and Brown, Patrice Gaines's, *Laughing in the Dark: From Colored Girl to Woman of Color - A Journey From Prison to Power* is another prospect for the political prisoner narrative. Although Gaines did not choose exile, she wrote a prisoner narrative that includes her experience of giving birth to a daughter who she could not rear

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21. Bettina Aptheker, *The Trial of Angela Davis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 16-19.

22. Joyce Ann Brown, *Joyce Ann Brown: Justice Denied, A True Story of Tragedy and Triumph in the American Justice System* (Chicago: The Noble Press, 1990), 22-28.

because she was incarcerated. Gaines centers her focus on the ways in which she worked her way up from being a convicted felon to an award-winning reporter for the *Washington Post*. Though her narrative is a revered contribution to Black women narratives, her memoir does not meet the criteria for this dissertation.

The quest for the political prisoner's memoir expands with *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers,* which includes over one hundred text written by Black women during the twentieth century. Of those accounts, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur were the only two authors who wrote prisoner narratives and avoided imprisonment. Nevertheless, Shakur's narrative meets the criteria as she experiences imprisonment, motherhood, and escape into self-selected exile. Thus, Jacobs and Shakur's autobiographies are carefully chosen, and the comparative analysis will reveal the similarities between the two narratives. Moreover, the rationale will help identify how the "speakerly text" is applied, in that Jacobs's narrative makes a social justice call that is answered by Shakur's *An Autobiography*. Furthermore, place and space are critical attributes that link the two narratives, making them eligible for selection.

The trope of place and space is established in *Incidents* as there is a chapter entitled "The Loophole of Retreat" that is located in the exact center of Jacobs' narrative. The chapter's central location seems to suggest its structural significance within Jacobs's narrative. Yet its central location is by no means obvious, as "The Loophole of Retreat" goes just as easily unnoticed in the middle of forty-one unnumbered chapters as it becomes—after careful enumeration—potentially quite prominent, as the hinge which balances twenty chapters on either side. It is almost as though this chapter is hidden in plain sight, much like the body of Jacobs herself, who finally discovers the safest hiding

place to be the most obvious one imaginable: in her own grandmother's house and in the center of her master's domain.

There is a unique method of escape documented in *Incidents* and *Autobiography*. Jacobs and Shakur were both strategic enough to disappear in plain sight. Though these texts were written centuries apart, both authors offer their personal experiences which provide a blueprint for what it means to survive an escape physically and mentally. Additionally, both works show shared experiences as it relates to self-selected exile, motherhood, and mental freedom despite being socially shackled.

Like *Incidents* establishes the significance of place and space in the enslaved female narrative, *Autobiography* illustrates African American autobiography written by women during the Black Power Movement is exceptionally distinguishable because this work is produced from a voice that is meant to be silenced literally and figuratively. "I was not anxious to write this book," Shakur asserts in the preface of her memoir.[23] However, she was convinced to begin writing while in jail awaiting trial in 1971. While jail is a space of confinement, Shakur utilizes this place as a platform to write a political autobiography.

Autobiography tells the history that immediately surrounds Shakur. She describes the political prisoner's struggle for survival. In the preface, Shakur directly states that she only chose to write the work when she came to the realization that others might learn from her commitments, i.e. she might turn others to the communist or Black Panther movement's cause. Much like *Incidents, Autobiography* disrupts the status quo that

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23. Assata Y. Shakur, *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 34-36.

alludes to Black political prisoners having an immoral, criminal mentality that undermines the advancement of society. Though incarceration is not ideal, Shakur uses the surroundings from her confinement to produce a radical work. Throughout the text, Shakur defines herself as a political prisoner and places particular emphasis on her role as a Black, politically centered female who is intentional about advancing all people of color.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, enslave narratives were an important means of opening a dialogue between Blacks and whites about enslavement and freedom. The most influential narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of enslavement as an institution and the humanity of Black people as individuals deserving of full human rights.[24] Although often dismissed as mere antislavery propaganda, the widespread consumption of CAANs offers a continuing prominence in literature and historical curricula in American universities that testifies to the power of these texts, then and now, to provoke reflection and debate among their readers, particularly on questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom. *Incident* proves that these authentic testimonies are produced from the psyche of the enslaved. As an African American abolitionist, Jacobs had the dual pressures of remaining true to her background as an enslaved female, while presenting a voice which could gain the attention of and persuade other abolitionists.

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24. William L. Andrews, "Slave Narratives: An Introduction to the Slave Narrative," *Documenting the American South* (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: 2004). 6-9, accessed September 13, 2018, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html.

Though the enslaved are deemed to be unintelligent, barbaric, and mentally deficient, Jacobs proves this notion to be a complete fallacy. *Incidents* illustrates the brilliance of the enslaved female mind, which was likely motivated by her desperation and determination to be free from captivity, oppression, servitude, and burdens that were designed to ruin people of color by controlling the mind of the ancestors. Additionally, Jacobs reveals the plight of the enslaved female, an uncomfortable truth that offered full details of the grudging truths of promiscuous enslaved masters. She faced constant sexual pressure from her master, Dr. Flint, who relentlessly pursues her even after her escape. Though struggling to survive the narrow route to freedom, Jacobs's responsibility as a mother would not allow her to leave her children behind during her pursuit of liberation. As a mother, Jacobs underwent the stress of ensuring her children's survival while trying to maintain her own.

Similar to *Incidents, Autobiography* demonstrates the brilliance of the oppressed's ability to exploit universal writing standards. This practice was designed to subjugate and suppress Blacks; yet, these captives adapted European writing standards in their struggle for survival. The mentioned memoirs are inextricably bound to experiences that demonstrate Black life in America that is influenced by the systematic oppression resulting from racism.

Methodology

Unearthing the common themes in the struggle for survival in Black women's narratives causes for a deep delve into sensitive research questions with marginalized populations which do not seek inclusion from the masses. More specifically, this research

will examine *Incidents* and *Autobiography* using critical feminist narrative analysis, which is a framework for research methods that present women's life experiences through the use of life history and feminist narrative analysis. Critical feminist narrative inquiry is informed by the theoretical triangulation of critical, feminist, and symbolic interactionist perspectives.[25] This approach is situated within narrative research and it identifies the epistemological preliminaries in *Incidents*, while supporting the assumption that *Autobiography* reflects Shakur's strategies in her struggle for survival is a modern, innovative methodology for liberation.

Employing this novel approach is suitable to advance knowledge about the nature and context of Jacobs and Shakur's individual experiences, to expose circumstances leading to mental liberation and social justice. Moreover, feminist narrative analysis is a framework that identifies as Afrocentric, which describes lived experience through dialogue, caring, accountability, race, class, gender, reflexivity, praxis, emotion, and concrete grounding.[26] Because narratives order characters in space and time and present a format for examining character transformations they enable social research to inquire about the construction of subjectivity in depth. The sequential development of a narrator's experience and position reveal her identity and gives insight into the speaker's life. Taking narrative as a starting point for social inquiry and focusing on the social role of stories in radical movements is a way of finding out more about how situated narration

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25. Nicole Pitre & Kushner, Kaysi & Raine, Kim & M Hegadoren, Kathy, "Critical Feminist Narrative Inquiry: Advancing Knowledge through Double-Hermeneutic Narrative Analysis," *ANS. Advances in* Nur*sing Scienc*e 36, no. 4 (May 2013): 118-32, accessed September 13, 2018 https://insights.ovid.com/article/00012272-201304000-00006, 118-32.

26. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 40, no.124 (July 1993): 129.

enables (or disables) new perspectives and actions in the world. More specifically, *Incidents* and *Autobiography* share perspectives that speak to mental liberation during physical confinement.

Conceptual Framework

Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought is employed as the conceptual framework as the lens through which to view the comparative analysis of *Incidents* and *Autobiography*. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Collins asserts that Black feminism remains vital because Black women constitute an oppressed group, and collaborates in a dialectical relationship that connects oppression and activism…and Black Feminist Thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge.[27] Collins explains that knowledge is a crucially important part of the social relations of domination and resistance. Moreover, this knowledge is shaped by Black women's lived experiences, which provoke the desire to advocate against oppression while implementing activism. More specifically, Jacobs and Shakur use their experiences to compose memoirs that speaks to the domination and tyranny of confinement for African Americans.

Though *Incidents* is recorded during enslavement and *Autobiography* written during the Civil Rights era, both narratives explicitly describe how the oppressor benefits from African American's captivity. Although over a century separates the two narratives, the theory of Black Feminist Thought bridges the gap and validates the conversation

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27. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–238.

between these "speakerly-texts."[28] This research is presented in a way that situates *Autobiography* in a literary position that speaks to *Incidents*. While Jacobs is not the only female to write a (en)slave narrative, she is the first and only women who selected to live in a self-confined space in her struggle for survival. Likewise, Shakur is the only political prisoner who documents her self-selected exile as a form of freedom. Per the premise of Black Feminist Thought, Jacobs and Shakur have shared experiences that are reflective of Black women as a collective. In a desperate attempt to obtain physical and mental liberation, Jacobs escapes from her master at the risk of death, and Shakur breakouts out of prison, evading an entire country, jeopardizing of her own life.

Like the analogous accounts in *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, Black women encounter similar challenges which are a result of living in a society that historically disgraces and degrades women of African descent. These shared experiences demonstrate the ways in which Black women are willing to flee from the familiar to a foreign place in pursuit of freedom to help liberate the entire Black community. In this struggle for survival, resistance is created through the Black women's autobiographical activism that suppresses individual standpoints and focuses on the advancement for all people of African descent. Hence, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins examines Black women's experiences beyond class, gender, age and socio-economic status to insure inclusivity. Additionally, Collins asserts that Black Feminist Thought relates to social justice, which

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28. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxv. In *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates asserts that "the black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts, is unifying the metaphor within this book. Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's [divine trickster figure in black culture] depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths (xxv)."

is a significant, reoccurring trope in *Incidents* and *Autobiography.* Both narratives represent the fact that voices of Black women have strengthened views that affect much larger issues of struggles for empowerment, human dignity, and social justice.[29] And according to this theory, both the changed consciousness of individuals i.e. Jacobs and Shakur and the social transformation of political and economic institutions around them constitute essential ingredients for social change. Moreover, Black women's knowledge is influenced by these issues as well as the "outsider within" positionality. The concept of "outsider within" comes from standpoint epistemology and has been taken up within Black Feminist Thought to authorize knowledge about the dominant society produced from a position of marginality.

Collins affirms that the composition of Black women's identity and experiences maintains their position as outsiders within spaces of oppression.[30] However, as Collins notes, the Black woman's position as an outsider-within provides her with a unique perspective on social, political, intellectual, and economic realities. Therefore, marginality is employed as a distinct viewpoint to feminist and social thought that gives the Black women an advantage in documenting her lived experiences. As demonstrated in *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, the "outsider within" status causes Black women to be invited into places where the dominant group has assembled, yet Black women remain outside as the oppressor still considers them invisible, attempting to revoke their voice when dialogue commences. The marginalized position of the outsider within begins to

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29. Patricia Hill-Collins, *Fighting words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 29-43.

30. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 12.

justify the role of confinement (space) and the significance of place in narratives of subjugated Black women.

Furthermore, this theory analyzes issues by integrating concerns of class, gender, and race, without compartmentalizing these matters as if people of color have the option to select which issue becomes a primary form of oppression. Collins suggests that Black Feminist thought offers an option to create new possibilities for Black feminist knowledge that does not require acceptance or approval from the Eurocentric worldview. Moreover, this concept asserts the importance of knowledge as a powerful tool to build encouragement and empowerment for the oppressed.

"An oppressed groups' experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult."[31] Though *Incidents* predates Black Feminist theory, Jacobs's work appeals to the aforementioned quote as she strategically uses her enslavement experience to appeal to white women and northern abolitionists, with the intent of exposing the horrors of slavery from a non-white perspective. Additionally, *Incidents* celebrates the reclamation of a Black women's sexual agency as a highly unorthodox tool of both psychological *and* physical liberation. Not to be confused with submission or surrendering to the white counterpart, Jacobs text speaks for enslaved Africans who were literally and figuratively silenced as a form of bondage. Equally important, *Incidents* negates the traditional prototype that describes enslaved women to be hopeless, submissive, and subjugated. Instead, Jacobs uses her

31. Ibid., 30.

Black voice to speak for a marginalized community, while becoming a dignitary in mainstream abolitionist history.

In conclusion, Black feminism is an ethical framework unique to Black women's lived experiences, and "for Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals—self-definition, or the power to name one's own reality—and, self-determination, aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny."[32] As demonstrated from the enslaved narrative and the political prisoner's memoir, this research traces the historical oppression of Black women from enslavement to modern times. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995) provides a descriptive summary of Black feminism as a standpoint theory as she asserted:

> [Black feminism] capture(s) the emancipatory vision and acts of resistance among a diverse group of African-American women who attempt in their writings [and practices] to articulate their understanding of the complex nature of Black womanhood, the interlocking nature of the oppressions Black women suffer, and the necessity of sustained struggle in their quest for self-definition, the liberation of Black people, and gender equality.[33]

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the parallel between the Black women's struggle for survival in the enslaved narratives and in that of the political prisoner's memoir. Considering the mentioned conceptual framework, this study is intended to test whether Black Feminist Thought is applicable for enslaved narratives and

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32. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 45.

33. Beverly Guy-Shefall, *Words of Fire: An anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The Press, 1995), 31.

political prisoner autobiographies written by women. However, this work must first decipher whether the liberating objectives of the bondswomen narrative manifest in the memoir of the racial revolutionary who is also female. Thus, to efficaciously apply Black Feminist Thought and the psychoanalytic theory this research must address the questions listed below:

1. In what ways, if any, does the liberation offered in enslaved female narratives reflect in memoirs written by female political prisoners?
2. What is the significance of place in narratives of subjugated, African American women writers?
3. What is the role of confinement (space) in the struggle for survival for African American women writers?

Limitations

Before the resurgence of interest in enslavement generated by the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, few historians or social scientists sought to mine the riches of the ex-enslaved testimonies. One major reason for this neglect was that until 1972 the entire collection was relatively inaccessible. Although the original transcripts were available for reference in the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress, the collection did not circulate, and its sheer bulk (more than ten thousand unindexed pages) undoubtedly discouraged efforts to use it more widely and effectively.[34] Since the early 1970s, however, both the entire Slave Narrative Collection and selections from it have

34. Norman Yetman, *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 24-25.

been widely reprinted, and the present effort by the Library of Congress to make the collection available through the Internet now renders that limitation moot.

Definition of Terms

1. Captive African American Narrative (CAAN): a narrative that is written by an enslaved African during the nineteenth century or an autobiographical text written by a political prisoner during the twentieth century.
2. Free Indeed: being free without constraints as another person, system, or subject does not have the authority to bind, capture, or prevent physical freedom.
3. Mental Liberation: freedom from the conditioning that results in autonomy from duality or double-consciousness, negative perceptions from stereo-types, self-hatred, and limitations.
4. Narrative: personal life experience documented in text by an enslaved woman of African descent.
5. Political Prisoner: someone committed to scrutinizing these social constructs by using their consecration to meditate on strategies to improve the advancement of the entire Black community and debunk all others. A person who lives in two worlds: a world of spiritual or mental freedom and one of physical or nonspiritual bondage
6. Radical Revolutionary: someone dedicated to revolutionizing society through changes in political power by utilizing unconventional methods to revolt against the unjust regulations and ordinances concerning African Americans.

Chapter Organization

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter I introduces the study by encapsulating the purpose of the research, statement of the problem, rationale, conceptual framework, methodology, and research questions. Chapter II investigates selected literature, which correlates with Black women narratives from other scholars who relate to the pervasive influence and literary activism from the memoir of the revolutionary writer. Chapter III focuses on Jacobs's exploration and confinement by exposing her desperate attempts to flee the harsh reality of being physically exploited as an enslaved woman. Additionally, this chapter explains that during the tenure in her self-made confinement, Jacobs wrote her autobiography which demonstrates her struggle for survival. Chapter IV sheds light on the workings of the American prison system as a site of racial and political repression by using Shakur's memoir as a focal referent. Chapter V explores the similarities between the enslaved African American woman's narrative to that of the political prisoner's memoir. Lastly, Chapter VI is the conclusion as it reiterates the intent of this research, which demonstrates the parallel between the struggle for survival from the enslaved narratives and that of the political prisoner's memoir.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter contains literature linking enslaved female narratives and memoirs written by African American women who were also political prisoners. It underscores the ways in which enslaved women unknowingly employed Black feminism to meaningfully represent themselves and engage in public debates on enslavement and racial and gender equality. Furthermore, it offers an understanding that Black women in the literary tradition have been historically and uniformly deprived of human agency. Overall, this literature pertains to the pen (writing) becoming an instrument of liberation when it was not offered in society. While research emphasizes enslaved narratives by women and Black women's autobiography, there is a lack of scholarly exploration on the literal *and* figurative significance of place and space when analyzing Black women's struggle for survival in autobiographical texts. Although, Joanne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* offers a precursor to the interconnection between Black women narratives and Black women autobiography, there is no emphasis on place and space. Although Braxton does not specify the significance of place and space, *Black Women Writing Autobiography* calls for a redefinition of American autobiography to include, within the tradition inscribed by Black males, an overlapping but distinct and important tradition that regrettably excludes the importance of Black women's autobiographies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

additionally, these Black women's personal narratives carve a lane in the literary highway that ordinarily only accommodated Europeans and occasionally, Black males. This literary lane is the direction for the exit towards mental liberation for both the author *and* the reader. While Jacobs and Shakur were physically in bondage, they did not allow their psychological state to succumb to suppression and captivity. Instead, they used the space of imprisonment to be an incubator to produce and protect a form of revolutionary activism. This notion is echoed in Johnnie Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*, in which she asserts:

> Despite many constraints—historical, sociological, and political—nineteenth-century African American women writers of autobiographical texts assumed literary power over their personal narratives and left written records of their struggles for freedom. They wrote at a time when the literary circles that dominated nineteenth-century American writing (and as a result, American reading) were predominantly close-knit, white-male bastions of power and authority. The result was that these women, excluded from "high" literary realms, infused their autobiographies with the flavor of social discourse—both in shaping their texts and in presenting their contexts.[1]

These narratives are far more than mere recounts of one's life but are accounts of literature demonstrating how Black women figuratively and literally struggled for a sort of freedom that was only offered to Europeans. In the carving of the literary lanes, these autobiographies help to usher Black women from margin to center.

In the preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks offers an explanation of marginality from a Black Feminist lens:

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body…Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out…Our survival depended

1. Johnnie Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* (Gainesville, FL: Orange Grove Books, 2009.), 7.

> on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view-a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.[2]

In the position of marginality[3], Jacobs and Shakur do not wish to join the majority nor compete with the oppressor; however, they use autobiographical texts to challenge the tyrants. As opposed to moving towards the center of the whole, these women cling to the margins as a point of resistance. While embracing the edges, they create radical boundaries that revoke Western conventions of Europeans being the authority. Works from Black women like Jacobs and Shakur force a new federation that does not require nor seek endorsement from the mainstream. Those who embrace the edge of the center have a view by which to see that liberation from the ills of the oppressive society must be both mental and physical.

According to hooks's theory in *Marginality as Site of Resistance*, embracing the margins "nourishes one's capacity to resist…offering the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."[4] Thus, marginality is a site of radical possibility and a space of resistance for Jacobs and Shakur who are physically, socially, and literally marginalized through the system of

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2. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (New York, London: Routledge, 2015),1.

3. According to hooks, marginality is the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. Marginality is a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in word but in habits of being and the way one lives.

4. bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," *Out There* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 341-343.

enslavement and incarceration. Neither *Incidents* nor *Autobiography* suggests that the authors struggle to stay in the margins even while their works may call them to the center. The center can be a place where the authors have to trade their Black Feminist perspectives for acceptance from the majority, which is a place of systemic oppression that perpetuates a unique type of bondage for African Americans. This suppression paralyzes the mind, manipulating the African American to believe that physical freedom is the extent to which liberation exists. Moreover, the systemic oppression is a plague that infects victims of marginalization, which is the intersectionality that is inclusive of all Black men, women, and children being free mentally and physically so that they possess the spirit of empowerment. This galvanized liberation does not allow the oppressor to have authority, not even if the African American is in physical bondage.

To further undergird the view from a Black feminist lens, frameworks proposed by Smith & Watson in *Women, Autobiography, Theory* provide a context that examines the choices that Black women employ to survive and overcome obstacles that are literally and figuratively life threatening. Braxton and Smith & Watson offer a feminist analysis framework to appreciate theoretical perspectives in Black women's autobiographical studies. More specifically, this framework emphasizes post-structural feminism. Post-structural feminist theory seeks to address and give legitimacy to both the similarities and differences of women and their experience, thus making up for the deficiencies commonly noted in other feminist theories.[5] As the name suggests, this philosophy

5. Freysinger, V. J., & Flannery, D., *Women's Leisure: Affiliation, Self-determination, Empowerment and Resistance?* (Loisir Et Societe: Society and Leisure, 1992), 303.

marries the ideas of poststructuralism with feminist theory, so it speaks to language, meaning making, power, and knowledge in terms of how it can end women's oppression.[6]

Also, in *Flat Footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives*, Patricia Bell-Scott and Juanita Johnson Bailey present a compilation of chronicles that demonstrate how Black women have a shared historical reality and, thus, a shared world view of historical resistance.[7] Through the use of Black feminism as a tool of analysis, this chapter will demonstrate how the marginalization of Black women creates a shared experience in *Incidents* and *Autobiography*.

Black Feminism in Black Women's Autobiography

Exploring *Incidents* and other slave narratives written by women, several authors highlight the ways in which enslaved women situate themselves and the women around them at the center of active resistance to slavery. *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* particularly focuses on the intimate relationships shared by Black women with their white mistresses or employers. John Ernest examines narratives by Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, and Mattie Jackson as representative narratives that substantiate a Black feminist standpoint in which the narrators exhibit critical analyses of

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6. Anne Greenawalt, "Sportwomen's Constructions of Identity and Learning Through Personal Narratives: A Poststructural Feminist Analysis for Creating History and Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2019), 20. accessed November 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

7. April L. Few, et al. "Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research With Black Women," *Family Relations* 52, no. 3, (December 2003). 205–215, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00205.x (Accessed March 28, 2019).

the Black women's labor such that work and economics are only one measure in a larger system of subjective valuation and personal worth.[8] Other measures include the significance of sisterhood (or support by other women who risk their lives aiding the captive) when the captive is in a state of being that is life threatening. For example, Jacobs receives food, clothes, and toiletries from her grandmother as she lives in self-made confinement in her grandmother's attic. Similar to Jacobs, Shakur obtains unwavering support from her sister, mother, and female defense attorney. Moreover, these narratives document relations between Black and white women in the urban cultural landscape where their intimate relations reveal complex interracial gendered interdependencies that proved Black women's self-worth in enslavement and freedom.

In *Incidents,* Jacobs depicts a network of women which she depends on and to which she attributes her freedom and survival. Her important relationships devolve from bonds of love. She loves, respects, and admires her grandmother, Aunt Martha, a free Black woman who wanted to help Jacobs gain her freedom. As an enslaved teenage girl, Jacobs could not bring herself to reveal to her unassailably, upright grandmother the nature of Dr. Flint's threats. Despised by the Dr. Flint's suspicious wife and increasingly isolated by her situation, in desperation, Jacobs developed an undisclosed liaison with Mr. Sands, a white attorney with whom Jacobs had two children, Benny and Ellen, by the time she was twenty years old. Hoping that by seeming to run away she could induce Dr. Flint to sell her children to their father, Jacobs hid herself in a crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother's house in the summer of 1835. As proven by her risky

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8. John Ernest, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12-15.

attempts and physical sacrifice, Jacobs demonstrates that she loves her children, her extended family, and others who were in shackles by the evils of enslavement. Jacobs's feelings for her employers, and for abolitionist Amy Post, derive far more from affection, acceptance, and a sense of worth than from patronage. There is nothing legalistic about these relationships. In *Incidents*, bonds of affection and support nourish the individual and contrast with the contrived and unreasonable bonds of enslavement. There is a mutuality in the interdependence where Jacobs's frustration leads to sympathy towards the women who were forced to reject their humanity because they had to embrace the characteristics of an oppressor to ensure that the enslaved remember that their place is subjection and suppression.

In *A Literature of Their Own* and *The New Feminist Criticism*, Showalter argues for the inclusion of marginalized women writers such as Jacobs. According to Showalter, since the central themes of men's texts exclude women, women need to create a literary tradition of their own. The first step in this literary autonomy is to evaluate the literature that has already been produced and find the value inherent in each text, even if the value is different than what is highlighted as significant in a male dominated text. Showalter discovered that many women's texts—including Jacobs's—have particularly common themes.

First is the theme of duplicity, which is defined when something appears advantageous on the surface, but beneath the surface lays a world of chaos. The second is the theme of disease, which includes hatred or disgust for the female body, or when a female character views her body as a source of imprisonment. Another notion is "doubling," which occurs when two sides of a female protagonist are presented. One side

demonstrates the dutiful woman and the other side reflects her rage. The final theme is the obsessive image of confinement in women's writing. All of the noted themes are apparent in *Incidents.*

Additionally, Showalter explains why women writers like Jacobs were kept out of the canon. Showalter suggests that women did not have the same educational opportunities as men; thus, women could not have possibly produced the same quality of writing as men did. To better identify the different qualities between male and female autobiography, Showalter asserts that:

> …women writers were acknowledged to possess sentiment, refinement…observation…domestic experience…and thought to lack originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence…[and] self-control. Male writers had most of the desirable qualities: power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning, abstract intelligence, shrewdness, experience,…and open-mindedness.[9]

Only in recent years has Jacobs's autobiography been rediscovered as valuable precisely because of these elements associated with female writing, elements which were originally the cause of her virtual exclusion from the earnest literary arena. Aside from the noted elements of feminine writing, and the fact that Jacobs was a Black woman, there are other reasons which may explain why her text has been excluded from the American canon. These issues are attributed to her style of writing.

Incidents has a very sentimental tone, which Jacobs uses to appeal to her audience of white female readers; however, the tone was not considered to be reflective of high-quality writing. The use of sentimentality in writing was a feminine characteristic, and since they were "denied participation in public life, women were forced to cultivate their

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9. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), 3.

feelings and overvalue romance…critics found this intensity, this obsession with personal relationships unrealistic and oppressive.[10] Despite what critics suggest, Jacobs uses the sentimental tradition of the period to her advantage in order to prove her similarity to this audience because they could relate to her because they too were women. As a result, Jacobs's text was read (and appreciated?) by female abolitionists; however, the text was still devalued from a literary standpoint.

In addition to sentimentality, Jacobs often spoke to her readers in the text, addressing them directly. This, too, was considered to be an unacceptable form, or at the very least, not formal enough to be in the modern American literary canon. Finally, because she never had any schooling, Jacobs's autobiography seems, at times, to be very plainly written. The lack of descriptive, lofty language coupled with the lack of complex structure also devalues the text.

CAAN were not to include any form of sentimentality because they were supposed to simply tell the story of enslavement to freedom in an unbiased way. If Blacks were to use sentimentality, it would seem as if they were trying to gain sympathy from the white readers. However, this was considered unacceptable in a racist society. In fact, CAAN written by formerly enslaved men, like Fredrick Douglass, included many of the themes seen in the traditional men's literature of the canon. Such themes in the male literature include conquering the frontier (in the slave's case, escaping to the frontier), striving for independence, and making a life as a self-reliant individual. Consequently, male slave narratives were more commonly accepted and more widely read because of

10. Ibid., 7.

the similar themes they shared with traditional white literature. These similarities and acceptance of male slave narratives created an even wider gap for women slave narratives to merge into the canon. *Incidents* includes a considerable amount of sentimental language, which describes the mistreatment of enslaved women to elicit sympathy. Because of this, her narrative is considered to be less credible. For example, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* offers a scathing critique of Jacobs's work. He asserts:

> The work is 'too melodramitc' to be considered an authentic slave narrative…[because] 'miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page…'…*Incidents* fails to adhere to the privileged and masculine themes of the slave narrative genre…[and] conforms to the less respectable themes and language of the popular sentimental romance.[11]

Because Jacobs attempted to appeal to her female audience by adhering to the sentimental genre with which they were familiar, her autobiography was dismissed as nothing more than melodrama.

The sentimentality continues in the text where Jacobs often apologizes directly to her female readers. This tone of apology was common in women's writing during the era of slavery. Annette Kolodny quotes the author Marion Harland in the introduction to her nineteenth-century novel: "Mine is a story for the table and arm-chair under the reading lamp in the living room, and not for library shelves."[12] Women apologized for "daring" to write, and they spoke of their writing in a self-deprecating manner. By apologizing,

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11. Krista Walter, "Surviving in the Garrett: Harriet Jacobs and the Critique of Sentiment" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (September 1994): 189-201.

12. Annette Kolodyny, "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 46-62.

they held onto their femininity, while simultaneously becoming published and their stories were being read by some but intended to affect all. Jacobs adopted this same pattern. In her preface to the book, Jacobs says, "when I first arrived in Philadelphia, a Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking." She is apologizing to her white female readers for not acting 'ladylike' in her strong actions. Writing, especially about and against slavery, was not considered to be a task that a woman should undertake. The only way to be strong was to eschew the passivity that was considered proper for women. But one can tell that this tone of apology "only masks rebellious feelings that Jacobs lets us glimpse throughout her narrative."[13]

In her preface, Jacobs asserts, "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself…neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of condition of the two million of women at the South still in bondage."[14] Jacobs has a tone of apology because it is proper to do so; however, she is not sorry for her actions. She merely wants her readers to realize that under the stresses of slavery, she was forced to minimize her feminine roles.

Jacobs's narrative was also excluded from the canon because of her personal first person-narration. However, slave narratives and autobiographies are intense personal

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13. Elizabeth C. Becker, "Harriet Jacob's Search for Home," *College Language Association Journal.* 35, no. 4 (June 1992): 411-21.

14. Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Myself* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 54.

accounts. For the female slave, this lack of personhood and humanity is even more dramatic. *Incidents* even "makes frequent appeals to a reader who is supposed to sympathize with the protagonist…"[15] Jacobs used this technique constantly, speaking directly to the reader as if she knows him or her, using phrases such as, "O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother."[16] Enslaved female writers spoke to their audience as if the readers were personal friends. However, canonized male writers rarely, if ever, spoke in the first person. In fact, according to Showalter, male critics "criticized the overemphasis" of the personal narrative and "understood that lack of education and isolation…had distorted women's values and channeled creativity into…emotional self-dramatization."[17] Jacobs was determined to prick the heart of her women readers, as she apologized in her writing so that the female readers would sympathize with her. However, there was no reason for the male writer to ask their readers for sympathy. Because of patriarchy, it was implicitly understood that male readers identified with male writers. Juxtaposed to male writers, Jacobs spoke overtly to her readers, which is another reason that her text was undervalued.

Among the noted explanations, Jacobs's text was also excluded from the canon because of the lack of descriptive language. The dialect in *Incidents* is forthright and candid, as Jacobs constructs plain sentences with undescriptive phrases. For instance, in describing her childhood Jacob asserts:

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15. Robyn R Warhol, "'Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot'; The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs's Text," *Narrative* 3, no.1 (January 1995): 52-57, accessed Sept. 28, 2018, www.jstor.org/stable/20107043.

16. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 7.

17. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), 71.

> "To this good grandmother I was indebted for many comforts. My brother Willie and I often received portions of the crackers, cakes, and preserves, she made to sell; and after we ceased to be children we were indebted to her for many more important services. Such were the unusually fortunate circumstance of my early childhood."[18]

This quote demonstrates her lack of descriptive language which makes the text absent of the aesthetic quality that was considered to be an important ingredient in what is considered canonized material.

The institution of slavery denied Jacobs a formal education, which could be the result of her undescriptive, simplistic language. Determined to become literate, Jacobs learned to read and write. The mere fact of Jacobs's literacy was defiant to the patriarchal system that created barriers to keep enslaved Africans in bondage mentally *and* physically. Despite the systemic oppression that attempted to prevent Jacobs from being literate, she used her literacy to document her life. Incidentally, Jacobs was condemned for the autobiography that she did produce with her limited resources.

Much like Jacobs, Black feminism influences Shakur's autobiographical text. Black feminism intercepts the issues of race, class, and gender; it does not force the Black woman to choose. Moreover, Black feminism employs the theory of intersectionality[19] which considers that various facets of humanity such as class, race, sexual orientation, disability and gender, do not exist separately; however, they are complexly interwoven, making their relationships essential to obtaining liberation for

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18. Jacobs, *Incidents,* 5.

19. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140 (1989):139-167.

African Americans. Shakur highlights the aforementioned through exposing the injustices in the American prison system as a site of racial and political repression. As a revolt against the American social system, her text explains how Black women are discriminated against in ways which do not fit precisely within the legal categories of either "racism" or "sexism," but there is a combination of both racism *and* sexism that vexes the oppressed. Additionally, Shakur expounds on the fact that there is an egregious error in the system of American "justice" since these elements should not be viewed separately, because the aspects in isolation result in misconceptions. Shakur indirectly challenges the reader to think of these elements as "inextricably linked" with one another because each issue is a part of the whole systemic oppression.

In addition to this, it is important to view Shakur's autobiography as a political work. Shakur asserts, "When I decided to write the book after all, it was because I had come to envision it as a political autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment."[20] As a political prisoner, Shakur is fighting a systematic battle that plagues Black men *and* Black women in America. She does not attempt to concentrate on one versus the other, she attacks the forms of repression for the entire Black community. However, she is aware of the male dominated atmosphere in literature; thus, she often reasserts her sex to reclaim authority. For example, Shakur describes herself as a "heroine," "sister" and "woman" throughout her autobiography, as well as other feminine terms. While her experiences in women's jails also attest to her classification of herself as a woman, she did not have her gender as

20. Shakur, *Autobiography*, 31.

the primary focus of this political text. Moreover, Shakur refers to her face as her primary descriptor.

Shakur's contemplation is undoubtedly influenced by the beginnings of Black feminism because her autobiography corresponds to Black feminism's tendency to offer a critique of not only sexism, but also class and race oppression. Hence, all three of these aforementioned are inextricably connected and noted in Shakur's work. For example, Black feminism is most notable in her criticism of the sexist attitudes of the male members of the Black Power Movement in which she was a member of a short time. She proclaims, "I was criticized very heavily by male members of Karenga's organization for doing a man's job. Women should not play leadership roles, they insisted.[21] In chapter four, she asserts that "by playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men as weak."[22] Shakur's condemnation is oriented primarily at the Black men in the movement who are unwilling to break free from the narrow confines of chauvinist thinking and who fight oppression and racism while not being wholly liberated from oppressive, sexist attitudes themselves. The point she attempts to iterate through her autobiography is that "adherence to values that perpetuate the patriarchal order (resulting in, among other things, […]the devaluation of women's work)" hurt African Americans as a group by

21. Ibid., 34-35.

22. Davis, *Autobiography*, 29.

undermining the solidarity needed to mount unified (i.e. across gender) resistance to shared racial oppression.[23]

Freedom in the Political Prisoner's Memoir

"America's greatest contribution to the world is its concept of democracy, its concept of freedom, freedom of action, and freedom of thought."[24] Unfortunately, the Black political prisoner has been revoked of these said rights. A political prisoner is one who has been imprisoned for holding or advocating dissenting political views. While the implementation of this "freedom" resulted in incarceration, Shakur uses her confinement as an opportunity to document an autobiographical text, which is a work that liberates people who are mentally in bondage. Similar to the Underground Railroad's path to freedom, the political prisoner's memoir has the propensity to provide a mental pathway to freedom. In her essay "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation," which she wrote in jail, Shakur asserts:

> The political prisoner's words or deed have in one form or another embodied political protests against the established order and have consequently brought him into acute conflict with the state. In light of the political content of his act, the "crime" (which may or may not have been committed) assumes a minor importance. In this country, however, where the special category of political prisoners is not officially acknowledged, the political prisoner inevitably stands trial for a specific criminal offense, not for a political act. Often the so-called crime does not even have a nominal existence.[25]

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23. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, 45.

24. Amir Ahmed Khuhro, *Personality as a Factor in Foreign Policy Making: A Case Study of Pak: US Relations During Benazir Bhutto Periods* (Saarbrücken: The Lambert Academic Publishing Company, 2012), 6.

25. Shakur, *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography*, 18.

The function of the prisoner's writing is to eradicate this construct, providing revolutionary works that will inform *and* deter people of African descent from being victims of the systematic structure in modern slavery, i.e. prison. The political prisoner's writing serves as both a weapon of liberation and a poem of love.[26] The text is the weapon of warfare that offers a guiding light to the African American soldier who is on the "battlefield" in the dark fighting for liberation from the oppressor. Meanwhile, the love of the text is demonstrated through the prisoner's commitment to sacrifice their own limited sovereignty to help liberate others. In prison, commitment to revolution has a special meaning and a special price. "To be identified as a revolutionary by the prison authorities means an almost permanent denial of parole, separation from the other prisoners, and solitary confinement."[27]

The political prisoner pays a heavy cost to manually record his revolts primarily for the emancipation of others who are physically in prison *and* those who live in the "free world" but are mentally imprisoned. Despite the sacrifice, Shakur's vow of solidarity is unwavering, and she provides leadership for the importance of centering a social critique on prisons/penalty rather than marginalizing the causes and crimes that lead to imprisonment. True to form as an activist intellectual who is witnessing injustice, Shakur emphasizes the anonymous people and the progressive movement who assisted in setting her free in 1972. So instead of celebrating the heroic attempt of "a single Black woman successfully fend[ing] off the repressive might of the state" she credits her

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26. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eyes* (New York: Random House, 1972) 45.

27. Ibid.

supporters in the updated introduction of her "autobiography": "Certainly the victory we won when I was acquitted of all charges can still be claimed today [in 1988] as a milestone in the work of grassroots movements."[28] Even though writing merely about her own life would be appropriate to do in an autobiographical act, this book about a twenty-eight year old emphasizes grassroots achievements over the pitfalls of a singular heroic narrative, as Shakur explains in the second edition of the book. Shakur could not conceive of what countless other Black revolutionaries have done—leaving the country while she was underground—after the shoot out in the Marin County courthouse: "But each time I considered going abroad, the thought of being indefinitely exiled in some other country was even more horrible than the idea of being locked up in jail. At least in jail I would be closer to my people, closer to the movement."[29]

For example, Mumia Abu-Jamal's circumstances demonstrate the suffering of the prisoner for the purpose of healing his fellow bother. Abu-Jamal writes, "one day after being served with a death warrant, I was served with a 'write-up,' a misconduct report for 'engaging actively in a business or profession' i.e., as a journalist…the state objects to me writing…while I'm in the most punitive sections that system allows, for daring to speak and write the truth."[30]

Like Abu-Jamal's example, the institutional offense of the political prisoner is that his writings paint an uncomplimentary picture of a prison system that calls itself

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28. Shakur, *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography*, 12.

29. Ibid., 89.

30. Abu-Jamal, Mumia, *Death Blossoms: Reflections From a Prisoner of Conscience* (Pennsylvania: The Plough Publishing House, 1997), 16.

"correctional" but does little more than corrupt human souls. This is a system that apprehends thousands of Blacks with the intent to oppress and confine, by using a system that teaches bitterness and hones hatred. The writings of the political prisoner seek to heighten awareness of the oppressed and eradicate the unwarranted, unjust authority of the oppressor.

Although prisoners are physically confined, the political prisoner functions as the protector for Blacks who are existing in the outside world; specifically, the prisoner who revolutionizes through autobiographical text. These texts have the ability to free the outside world because these works discuss the lives of those who revolted against the rules of society and the history of how they still became mentally liberated despite their physical constraints. By definition, incarceration is the confinement in a jail/prison or imprisonment. However, for the political prisoner, incarceration removes one from the ills of a society which only operates with the intent of oppressing African Americans in *every* social construct. Unfortunately, African Americans are misled to believe that there are equal opportunities for all. And if one is living in this illusive society, it can be extremely difficult to identify the misrepresentations of how/why Blacks actually fit into the social construct in white America.

The political prisoner is committed to scrutinizing these social constructs by using their seclusion to meditate on strategies to improve the advancement of the entire Black community and debunk all others. The prisoner understands that freedom is not contingent upon one's physical status, yet liberation is dependent upon one's mental state. It is possible for one to be physically free but psychologically detained. The political prisoner is also an activist who has a heightened conscience, understanding that

liberty cannot be given but it must be acquired through conquest. And conquest is not attained/achieved by the submission to the limited boundaries of America; it is attained/ achieved simply by revolutionizing with a structured plan to permanently be freed.

By definition, a revolution is a fundamental social change in power or organizational structure that takes place in a relatively short period of time. Hence, these prisoners are trying to eradicate these social constructs by activating a "long distance" revolution. Although revolutions are thought to be physical, the political prisoner is attempting to evoke a social change by transforming our community to a place of psychological independence through autobiography. The utility of the prisoners' memoir is to provide a blueprint of how an incarcerated Black man can be free while in the confinement of a white man's penal system.

The intent of these "long distance revolutionaries" is to revisit the doctrine of African American writing that is not aligned with white standards. These advocates eradicate the norms while avoiding the need for approval from the mainstream. Also, they have mastered the art of literally writing from the inside out; they are writing from the inside of a penal system to the outside world. Though the writing is done from the inside of a penitentiary, it is certainly functioning as a tool to transform those in the "free world."

The gates which keep the prisoners confined is an illustration of the gates which are guarded by the political prisoners. Standing at the entrance of the prison gate and the exit to the "free world," the political prisoner has the wisdom to warn the "free" of the invisible dangers of the oppressor. This position gives the prisoner the authority to educate, uplift, and protect the Black community.

Autobiography as Activism

In *Autobiography as Activism*, Margo V. Perkins examines how three women of the Black Power movement, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, use the genre of autobiography as a vehicle to deliver an alternative history of the civil rights movement. By connecting their personal lives to the political, these women use their life stories to both educate and mobilize their audiences. Perkins notes consistent values and conventions that govern the writing of political activists. She asserts that these expectations shape a genre of writing called political autobiography, a term coined by Angela Davis, who wrote that when she decided to write her autobiography "it was because I had come to envision it as a political autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment."[31]

In *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*, Johnnie Stover asserts that Black women writing their autobiographies in the nineteenth century created a new form of autobiography, "not so much as a subgenre as a countergenre," that is based on resistance. Both Jacobs and Shakur use the autobiographical genre as an extension of their political activism. These women resist the traditional form of autobiography and use the genre as an act of resistance--and often use the pronoun "we" instead of "I." Stover writes: "As nineteenth- century African American women began recording their narratives for themselves, they continued to speak for their own needs as

31. Davis, *Autobiography*, 29.

well as for those of the other members of the communities."[32] Noting consistent values and conventions that govern the writing of political activists, this study asserts that *Incidents and Autobiography* are narratives which are best situated in the genre of political autobiography.

Margo V. Perkins writes that a key component of political autobiography is the ability of "subjects [to] manipulate the fiction of narrative to make sense of the past through the present".[33] It is this fiction of development that becomes "an indispensable aspect of political autobiography." This condition, as Frank Kermode refers to as the "double consciousness" of autobiography, is essential for understanding the process in which one moves towards a revolutionary consciousness--and, as Perkins importantly notes, this is achieved by theorizing significant events that illustrate the birth and development of a revolutionary consciousness; therefore, "events that may have had any number of meanings at one time are reduced to a single meaning that enables them to fit more convincingly into a narration of development."[34]

Perkins analyzes the autobiographies of three Black women who were involved in the Black Power Movement in the United States during the 1960s: Elaine Brown's *A Taste Of Power* (1992), Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). The investigation of these three influential women speaks to the importance of the female political prisoner's voice.

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32. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism,* 41.

33. Perkins, 42.

34. Ibid.

Moreover, the voice of the political prisoner is thought to be silenced; however, these autobiographies prove that one has the authority to speak despite the failed attempts of Europeans to mute the African American's voice. As explained in her introduction, this book investigates "the different ways these activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods, their emphatic linking of the personal and political in agitating for transformative action, and their constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing."[35] This is a very appropriate study for two reasons: it intersects with the numerous studies of the Black Power era that have appeared in the last ten years, and it intervenes in the now promising field of American autobiography studies, especially Black American autobiography studies.

An important aspect of political autobiography includes challenging hegemonic history and the controlling images that dominate and create a distorted view of that history. As Barbara Harlow asserts, "The connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives."[36] As an extension of her activism, Shakur uses her autobiography to combat the negative and controlling images of Black women and men that have been used to legitimize and condone both exploitation and violence against African Americans.

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35. Perkins, 6.

36. Ibid., 112.

"Assata Shakur's memoir is a political autobiography which tells of an African-American woman's experience in the American police and juridical system."[37] This quote provides a general description of all the noted African American authors. Though incarceration is not a glamorous state, it has impacted the life of great African American autobiography. Black writers that have experienced imprisonment usually have a different approach to autobiographical work. For instance, their accounts are received as realistic and appealing to the common man. In addition, Shakur' autobiography speaks to the ways in which the political prisoner's memoir can function as a tool of liberation; although the subject is physically detained, she is mentally emancipated as she literally obtained her freedom through selected-exile, fleeing to Cuba where she could be literally and figuratively free.

Though incarceration is not a glamorous state, it has impacted the life of African American autobiography. Black writers that have experienced imprisonment usually have a different approach to autobiographical work. For instance, their accounts are received as realistic and appealing to the common man. Published autobiographical works make the life of the subject open to the public without the restriction of secrecy. It is noteworthy to identify Black autobiographies that were composed during a period of incarceration. Although slavery was not recognized as "jail," the confinements of slavery were very similar to that of imprisonment; therefore, the life of African Americans has always been exploited and owned by the white majority. This work speaks to the public influence of Black autobiography. More importantly, a published autobiographical work

37. Ibid., 102.

of an African American prisoner demonstrates the strides and progress of African American literature.

Thus, this study supports the Henry Louis Gates's theory that African Americans most significant literary aspect is the personal memoir. In particular, bounds and constraints are an important thread in the culture of the African American autobiography. From slavery to imprisonment, Black autobiography continues to speak for and to the masses in an attempt to heighten the conscience of the Black community. It is remarkable for a marginalized group to create the space *and* place for the unsung heroes to be heard and recognized in mainstream society.

"Like some of the slave narratives written for abolitionist propaganda purposes between 1830 and 1860, some autobiographies are written with the collaboration and assistance of a second party."[38] Acknowledging several distinguished Black authors, this text suggests that Black autobiography is rich and varied, from slave narratives to notable works by Black intellectuals. This text represents a collective of African Americans from different groups, sects, and social classes i.e. prisoners that publish canonical works.

The mentioned African American prison autobiographies are informative yet controversial works as they suggest that the truth of Black life can be the death of racial injustice. This notion is proven through the virtuous African American leaders who used their prison experience as a positive addition to their distinguished memoirs. Specifically, African American prisoners that speak the authentic truth of Black life can help to destroy the rejection of the Black voice. The Black voice was meant to be

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38. Richard K. Barksdale, "Black Autobiography and the Comic Vision," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 1 (June1998): 22-27.

silenced by the systemic oppressions but the information in this research is proof that the Black voice can be heard by manipulating the language of the white oppressor.

As explained in Perkins' introduction, this book investigates "the different ways these activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods, their emphatic linking of the personal and political in agitating for transformative action, and their constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing."[39] This is a very appropriate study for two reasons: it intersects with the numerous studies of the Black Power era that have appeared in the last ten years, and it intervenes in the now promising field of American autobiography studies, especially Black American autobiography studies.

Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement is an award-winning collection of sixteen essays on Black women's social and political activism during the twentieth century. It is a seminal contribution to the study of African American and women's history. Utilizing "autobiographical, biographical, and sociopolitical analysis," the essays trace the evolution of Black women's contributions to social and political change.[40]

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39. Perkins, 23.

40. Bettye Collier-Thomas, and V. P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University, 2001), 26.

Conclusion

The mentioned African American prison autobiographies are informative yet controversial works as they suggest that the truth of Black life can be the death of racial injustice. This notion is proven through the virtuous African American leaders who use their prison experience as a positive addition to their distinguished memoirs. More specifically, the noted African American prisoners speak the authentic truth which can help to destroy the rejection of the Black voice in canonical literature. The Black voice was meant to be silenced but the information in this research is proof that demonstrates, Black autobiography was birth from the accounts of slave narratives that speak through physical oppressions.

It is important to understand the literary influence of enslaved narratives and its role in creating a place for autobiography of the African American prisoner. Sidonie Smith's *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* traces the patterns of African American autobiography from slavery to emancipation. "A study of patterns of slavery and freedom in Black America argues that all writing in this category was and is motivated by the Black man's or Black women's search for identity."[41] Surprisingly, the pattern is consistent in many areas that demonstrate that often the Black voice has to be authenticated by the approval of white America. However, this may not apply to instances of Black prisoners that write

41. Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 7.

canonical autobiographies in which their voice can be heard by manipulating the language of the white oppressor.

In closing, the intent of this continuous research is to demonstrate the parallel between the liberation from the slave narratives and that of the political prisoner's memoir. This research will address the need for a new form of liberation that could potentially help free the African American community from mental bondage. Thus, this study will investigate how the writings of the "political prisoner" function as tools to guard the gates of the African American community. More specifically, these writings offer mental liberation for those who are in bondage by the oppressions of society.

CHAPTER III

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE CONFINEMENT IN *INCIDENTS*

Jacobs's narrative demonstrates her desperate plan to flee from the harsh reality of being physically exploited as an enslaved female. She opens the narrative by reflecting on her childhood years in a "happy home," where she lived with her mother and father, who were considered "well-off" enslaved African Americans.[1] At age six, Jacobs's mother dies, and she is sent to live with her mother's mistress, Mrs. Flint, who educates Jacobs, teaching her to read, write, and sew. Unfortunately, when Jacobs is twelve, Mrs. Flint dies, and Jacobs is willed to Flint's five-year-old niece, Mary Matilda, the daughter of Dr. Flint. It is this transfer of ownership that creates a drastic change in Jacobs's life. She writes vivid details of Dr. Flint's sexual advances shortly after she becomes a teenager. Although she is sexually harassed and prohibited from marriage, she escapes to the North to avoid this unforgiving existence. Jacobs did not take this flight to freedom alone, she left with her children, Benny and Ellen. Unwilling to submit to her master's abuse, but equally unwilling to abandon her family, she hides in the attic crawl space in her grandmother's house for seven years. Jacobs's multifaceted escape is a testament to her fierce struggle for survival. Thus, her work is eligible to become a focal referent for dichotomizing the enslaved females' memoir.

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1. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Myself* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 8.

Literary Value of Incidents

Harriet Jacobs is the first woman to author a fugitive slave narrative in the United States. However, she was not celebrated as was Ellen Craft, a runaway from Georgia, who became internationally famous for the daring escape from slavery that she and her husband, William, engineered in 1848. During this time, Ellen impersonates a male slaveholder joined by her husband in the role of her faithful slave as they travel from enslavement in Savannah to freedom in Philadelphia. This thrilling narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), *was* published under both of their names but has always been attributed to William's inspiration. By contrast, Jacobs's autobiography is "written by herself," as the subtitle of the book proudly states. Perhaps more astonishing than the Craft's narrative, *Incidents* represents a profound story of an African American woman's resourcefulness, courage, and dauntless quest for freedom.

Jacobs's primary motive in writing *Incidents* is to address white women of the North on behalf of thousands of "slave mothers [who] were still in bondage" in the South. In the introduction of the text, she asserts that her story is painful, and she would rather keep it private; however, she is compelled to make it public so that it may assist in the antislavery movement. Additionally, in the preface, Lydia Maria Child makes a similar argument, in that the events in the text are true and should undergird the fight for freedom for the enslaved African.

Through several erudite mediums, *Incidents* has been introduced into the American literary canon and is now part of a rich, valuable tradition of African American literature. While the details in this text have become a fixture in African American history, scholars and readers alike have referred to this text as a pivotal indication in

understanding the life of the enslaved women, specifically. The important themes of the text include: family and community, the perils of slavery for women, the corrupting power of slavery, motherhood, and perseverance. These interesting elements have deservedly started to receive critical acclaim and analysis from academia and the masses.

Struggle for Survival

In her narrative, Jacobs reveals the particular plight of the female slave, an uncomfortable truth that both supports antislavery and exposes harsh realities of slavery from the lens of an enslaved woman who is seemingly "privileged." She faces constant sexual pressure from her master, Dr. Flint. He relentlessly pursues her even after her escape. Jacobs's desperation for survival is demonstrated through her flight to freedom which resulted in her living in her grandmother's attic for seven years. While living in this attic, Jacobs is not accessible to Dr. Flint, which makes her free from sexual harassment; however, she is not *free indeed*. Being *free indeed* suggests that Jacobs is literally and figuratively unrestricted in her whereabouts. It also means that she has the autonomy to exist without constraints from the indefatigable acts of enslavement. Before Jacobs becomes *free indeed*, she frees herself from the injustices of sexual violation, discrimination, and physical bondage through her decision to retreat to the attic above her grandmother's house. Although Jacobs is concerned about her own freedom, as a loving mother, she undergoes the stress of also ensuring her children's survival.

The risk Jacobs takes in escaping to this limited sort of liberation is an apparent manifestation of her struggle for survival. She is willing to risk her life as an enslaved woman to gain her life as a free African American woman. Moreover, the details of her

escape reinforce the notion that physical freedom is worth the risk of death because it can lend itself as a tool to obtain mental emancipation. Thus, without physical freedom one's psyche can be immobilized. This lack of psychological progression is a ploy from the original colonizers to keep enslaved Africans in a physical *and* mental state of bondage. The prevention of education is a plague that has inhabited people of African descent since the Transatlantic Slave Trade regretfully stole the intellectual crown of kings and queens.

While the captors attempted to rob enslaved Africans of their erudite heritage, narratives like *Incidents* start the doctrinaire reclaiming process. Slave narratives do not simply function as tales of endurance and survival, but they utilize a distinctive authorial voice which contributes to their persuasive power. More specifically, Jacobs demonstrates her agency and empowerment as she describes the extraordinary circumstances of her escape. She explains that she conceals herself in her grandmother's attic for seven years before she had an opportunity to flee north to freedom. In what Jacobs considers a "little dismal hole," she could do little more than sit up in the cramped space, she remains in this attic for the next seven years, sewing, reading the Bible, watching over her children as best she could. Exercising her wisdom, she writes occasional letters to Dr. Flint, which were intended to confuse him as to her actual whereabouts.

After seven years spent hiding in her grandmother's attic, Jacobs writes letters pleading with Mr. Sands, the newly elected congressman (and her pseudo-lover) to free her family. After Mr. Sands was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1837, he honor's Jacobs's wish and purchased their children. However, Mr. Sands moves to Washington, D.C. without emancipating either Benny or Ellen. Eventually, her

children were taken north where Jacobs would soon follow. After spending seven dreadful years stowed away in her grandmother's attic, Jacobs is smuggled on a ship to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her escape led her to New York, determined to reclaim her daughter from Mr. Sands, who sent Ellen to Brooklyn, New York, to work as a house servant. New York is where she experiences firsthand discrimination against African Americans in the North. Even in New York Jacobs is at the unjust mercy of the Fugitive Slave Law, which meant that wherever Jacobs lived in the United States, she could be reclaimed by the Flints and returned to slavery at any time. But in 1852, Jacobs's employer, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, purchases her freedom from the Flints.

It is likely that Jacobs felt the dual pressures of remaining true to her enslaved brothers and sisters while presenting a voice which could gain the attention of white audience and persuading abolitionists to support her agenda of independence and equality. This meditative voice is vital to the success of the slave narrative, as ultimately the narrative's ability to tell a remarkable story of survival and escape was secondary to its intended function as an anti-slavery document which would compel white Northerners to subscribe to the abolitionist cause. Jacobs addresses the reader directly at certain points in the narratives, forcing them to imagine the suffering they could endure if they found themselves in the author's position.

Quest for Literacy and Freedom

Although many critics have noted the importance of literacy in slave narratives, there has been little explicit theorization of literacy itself. For example, James Olney states that slave narratives usually contain a "record of the barriers raised against slave

literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write."[2] According to this statement, Olney seems to define literacy simply as reading and writing, and he does not tie it into a larger politics of liberation. Indeed, literacy has been seen as one of the most essential components of the slave narrative genre and it has often been associated with freedom, but the link between literacy and freedom is rarely presented as problematic in any way. As such, Henry Louis Gates argues that "freed Back slaves created a genre of literature that at once testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate…There is an inextricable link in the Afro-American tradition between literacy and freedom…the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away. In literacy lay true freedom for the black slave.[3]

Gates repeats the link between freedom and literacy three times in this short passage, and then explains a few lines later that "the black slave narrators sought to indict both those who enslaved them, and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement. They did so using the most enduring weapon at their disposal, the printing press."[4] In this scenario, words fight the ideological system that condoned slavery, because writing challenges the notion that enslaved Africans are sub-human, animals or chattel to be traded. To write is to move from object to subject. Per Houston Baker, the enslaved narrator had "to seize the word. His being had to erupt from nothingness. Only

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2. James Olney, "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Calloloo* 2, no. 20 (December 1984): 46, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299351.

3. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1987) 9.

4. Ibid.

by grasping the word could he engage in the speech acts that would ultimately define his selfhood."[5] Thus, the attainment of literacy is a crucial part of the slave narrative genre. Yet literacy, while absolutely necessary to freedom and the tool for challenging the ideological view of the enslaved as sub-human-is also the tool wielded by hegemonic society to maintain slavery, for a system of laws and legal discourse, Biblical rhetoric, and propaganda was used to keep slaves "in their place."

The problem Jacobs faces in her narrative, then, is how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when language itself is a large part of her oppression. How can Jacobs use her literacy in a way which liberates her from the dominant discursive practices of her society? To speak in the "master's" language is to remain trapped within a system of discourse which denies her subjectivity. Audre Lorde has said that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." One cannot overcome oppression by using the master's tools, and if language is an instrument of oppression, simply taking hold of it will not lead to liberation, nor will it lead to a dismantling of the master's house. For a time, Jacobs does try to use the "master's tools" to dismantle his house; she tries to use language against the master without rejecting its abusive and coercive underpinnings. Ultimately, however, she realizes the oppressive nature of "the master's tools" and strives to move beyond them.

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5. Houston A. Baker Jr., "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," *The Slave's Narrative*, eds., Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 39.

In striving to move beyond the master's tools, Jacobs demonstrates her attainment of what educational theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo have called "critical literacy." According to Macedo and Freire, individuals who are critically literate can begin "transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their 'culture of silence."[6] Literacy, in this sense, is not simply reading the word, but reading the world. And literacy also involves transforming the world; literacy "becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices."[7] According to this definition, a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction. Applying Freire's and Macedo's concept of critical literacy to *Incidents* demonstrates that for narrators like Jacobs, the real struggle is not learning to read and write the word but learning to read and write the world. Critical literacy involves an understanding of how language practices have functioned to keep slaves disempowered, imprisoned in a "culture of silence." But critical literacy also involves an attempt to transform the structures of oppression: not simply to replicate the master's house, but to dismantle it. Jacobs employs critical literacy as she understands how language has functioned to disempower her, but she also begins to challenge these signifying practices. Jacobs fashions a new relationship to language and finds a voice which challenges her culture's language practices even as it creates its own. Thus, she achieves the critical literacy

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6. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), 50-51.

7. Ibid., 120.

described by Macedo and Freire. As a result, Jacobs begins transforming the dominant social order, rather than merely serving it.

As explained by Macedo and Freire, literacy is a set of practices that function to either empower or disempower people. Literacy must then be analyzed according to whether it "reproduce[s] existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change."[8] Therefore, it is essential that enslaved narrators not only become literate, but critically literate. It is important that they read the word *and* the world. Moreover, they must realize that language can be used to either transform, or to serve, the dominant social order. Like Jacobs, the enslaved autobiographer must see that literacy is both the key to freedom and the grounds upon which slavery is justified. Language is intertwined with reality, and critically literate slave raconteurs understand that uses of language reflect oppressive-realities. Furthermore, these narrators will work to change these oppressive realities. Learners who are critically literate can identify the power struggles within language, yet they can also conceive of ways of transforming language and transforming reality. Many narratives by enslaved Africans reveal an understanding of the power struggles which intersect in language.

Jacobs understands that language is an instrument of both oppression *and* liberation. While she employs her use of literature and language, Jacobs does not seek mastery of the master's discourse. Although Jacobs is taught to read and write by her master, she understands that to use the master's discourse is to remain trapped within it.

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8. Ibid., 35.

More specifically, Freire and Macedo assert, she understands that "to continue to use the language of the colonizer...is to continue to provide manipulative strategies that support the maintenance of cultural domination."[9] Rather than trying to control the duplicitous and coercive qualities of language, Jacobs rejects the authoritative, abusive, and misleading functioning of language. According to Laura Tanner, Jacobs has only "the vehicle of a purely 'white' language," a language which is "inherently inadequate for portraying her 'form of life."[10] But any given language is made up of a number of different language games, games which may overlap but which certainly change. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explains, "There are . . . countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences.' And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten."[11] Jacobs takes advantage of this multiplicity, and brings a new language game into existence. She radically reconfigures her culture's language game, seeking a language game based in truth, community, and a shared sense of experience. In so doing she demonstrates her ability to use her literacy as an account for agency, as an attempt to rescue her history, experience, and vision from the dominant social and discursive patterns of her society.

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9. Ibid., 121.

10. Martha J. Cutter, "The Master's House: Critical Literacy in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *Callaloo* 19, no. 1 (December 1996): 209, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299351.

11. P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1996), 45.

Self-made Confinement

Confinement suggests that one is forced to reside in a place with limitation and restriction. However, confinement means the complete opposite for Jacobs as her self-made confinement gives her a limited freedom that is not afforded with her overseers. To avoid the real imprisonment of the colonizer, Jacobs hides herself in the storeroom crawlspace at her grandmother's house from 1835 until 1842. Although she is technically restricted, Jacobs exercises her intellect by reading the Bible and writing letters to Dr. Flint. While she is a literate, she still experiences all these forms of linguistic disempowerment, and she struggles to find a way of liberating herself from the master's oppressive system of discourse. Unlike other slave narratives, Jacobs experiences a sexual and philological oppression unique to female slaves. As Jacobs explains, women in slavery have gender-specific problems: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."[12] More explicitly, Jacobs is speaking of sexual harassment and rape."[13] For many literate enslaved Africans, reading becomes the pathway to freedom, but for Jacobs it becomes yet another vehicle for violation and abuse. While literacy is a beneficial tool which helps the enslaved African catapult towards mental liberation, Jacobs identifies the word as the agent through which she loses her virtue.

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12. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 77.

13. Ibid.,125.

However, Jacobs is inclusive and repeatedly stresses that her situation is not unique. While enslaved men were victims of abuse, it was far more common and accepted for females to be subjected to both verbal and sexual abuse condoned by a system of legal discourse. Jacob asserts,

> "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress… in either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death..." Knowledge of evil comes early to slave girls, and language is frequently the conduit for this knowledge: "The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers."[14]

Moreover, a conspiracy of silence protects the abuser, as is the case in Jacobs's situation: "The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished."[15]

During the master's abuse, slaves are usually silent. Unfortunately, this seems to be the game's unbroken rule. Out of fear of being separated from her children or even death, Jacobs follows this rule because Dr. Flint constantly threatens her life if she denounced him by resisting his sexual advances. Eventually Jacobs does try to use language as a tool of defiance, only to learn that Flint usually wins these battles despite her desperate attempts. She openly expresses her contempt for Flint, but still finds that he wants to sexually exploit her. While it was difficult for Jacobs to use words to circumvent

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14. Ibid., 27.

15. Ibid., 27.

Dr. Flint, her most powerful resistance to Flint centers on her affair with Samuel Sawyer. Jacobs believes this affair will give her some sexual freedom, but she also seeks a discursive power: She admits her feeling of empowerment as she asserts, "As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him."[16] When the time comes for her revelation, Jacobs does seem to have turned the discursive tables on her master:

> At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, 'I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there.' I replied, 'I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother.' He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement and left the house without a word.[17]

Ultimately, Jacobs seems to have beaten the master at his own game. She learns how to play the game by watching the game creators paly. Jacobs has observed Dr. Flint and applies what she learns then uses it to silence him. Yet Jacobs is not happy in her "check-mate" of Flint: "I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched...My self-respect was gone!"[18] Although she uses language as a medium to overcome the master's oppression, Jacobs recalls that even at an early age she suffered verbal harassment which is the same tool that she uses to seemingly liberate her. In the first chapter Jacob describes how Dr. Flints words were scorching, scathing her ears, and burned her brain like fire. Dr. Flint's early abuse is a precursor to the more systematic abuse that begins

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16. Ibid., 89.

17. Ibid., 27.

18. Ibid., 39.

when she is fifteen and that is again verbal. Jacobs describes that he whispers foul words in her ear, while trying to corrupt the “pure principles” that were taught by her grandmother by polluting her mind with unclean images. Moreover, Dr. Flint's verbal abuse is not limited to spoken words; when he finds that Jacobs can read, he uses letters to manipulate her mind and master the language game. His intent was for Jacobs to lose her self-respect and the respect of the people she loves.

The consequences of playing Dr. Flint's language game are too high for Jacobs; beating him at his own game separates her from those she loves most. Jacobs decides that she wants to confess these unwanted encounters with her grandmother. However, she feels guilty about indulging in this language game, which causes the hesitation in talking to her grandmother, the women she admires and respects the most. Jacobs's "victory" over Dr. Flint is only a transient achievement achieved at the cost of her own long-term happiness. Perhaps Jacobs has learned that using the master's tools, as Lorde explains, may allow women to temporarily beat [the master] at his own game, but it will never enable African Americans to bring about genuine change.

Jacobs has learned that when she uses language within the master's house, within the parameters of the master's system of discourse, she can only mimic, not transform the dominant order. This lesson is repeated in Chapter Twenty-Five, when Jacobs engages in a battle of texts and words with Dr. Flint. Hoping to convince him that she is in the North, she has a friend mail letters from New York and insists on hearing his reaction. Jacob asserts, "I concluded I should hear my letter read the next morning. I told my grandmother Dr. Flint would be sure to come and asked her to have him sit near a certain

door, and leave it open, that I might hear what he said."[19] Again, Jacobs believes she has turned the discursive tables on his and she supposes that she is in control, creating and manipulating language and texts, using her literacy to create a false reality. Regrettably, Dr. Flint still controls the creation of a false reality through language; yet, Jacobs is still within the master's system of discourse. Dr. Flint suppresses the letter Jacobs prepared, substituting his own letter which has Jacobs apologizing for "the disgraceful way she left him and her children." And to add further confusion she begs to come home. Jacobs succeeds in her practical aim as she convinces him that she is far away. Conversely, she does not succeed in her discursive aim as she does not gain control of her voice, or of her representation of herself. While Dr. Flint believes her original letter, he still rewrites it, annexing her voice.

Jacobs continues to write these letters from time to time to convince him that she is in the North, but she never again takes the same pride and glee in her "mastery" of language. Indeed, mastery of language itself is suspect, because it is being allied with "the master." Later in her narrative, when Jacobs contacts Mrs. Hobbs about her daughter Ellen, Jacobs takes a radically different attitude towards the production of a false reality through language. Jacobs writes another duplicitous note but takes none of the pride in doing so that she had with Dr. Flint. In the last of the memoir, Jacobs proclaims, "I like a straightforward course, and am always reluctant to resort to subterfuges. So far as my

19. Ibid., 121.

ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon slavery. It was the system of violence and wrong which now left me no alternative but to enact a falsehood."[20]

Yet this passage insinuates that Jacobs is aware of language's potential for duplicitous functioning, and that she dislikes this duplicity because she associates it with being trapped within the master's discourse, the master's house. Hence, she is reluctant to resort to falsehood, yet she now knows that her culture's language games revolve around it. She continually suspects everyone around her of linguistic subterfuge, and this isolates her in her own discursive world. Jacobs admits to longing for someone to confide in, but she is uncomfortable because she has been deceived by "white people" who approach her with a lascivious intent.

Having realized and rejected the duplicity of language, Jacobs finds herself excluded from any language game, isolated outside the world of discourse. Nonetheless, eventually Jacobs's faith in language is renewed by friendship, and she postulates a language game which revises the discursive politics of her own world. In so doing she attains critical literacy and begins to use her language as an instrument of liberation and transformation.

Critical Literacy

Ultimately, words themselves are not deceitful; yet, it is the way in which words are used and the context in which they are placed by human beings that make words deceitful. In short, it is the language game, not language, which creates problems. So,

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20. Ibid., 165.

although words are the tool which promotes Jacobs's degradation, they can also facilitate her redemption. Yet the word must be understood in a certain way by a compassionate listener who activates their wisdom in understanding others so that there is revealed “a soul revived" rather than "a fallen woman." At this point in her narrative, Jacobs is not sure that such a listener exists because she distrusts human beings i.e. white slave owners, so it is not surprising that she also distrusts language. As she develops friendships with women in the North and renews her relationship with her daughter, Jacobs reaffirms her faith in language, her understanding of how language can be cleansed of its tainting duplicity.

In chapter 39, Jacobs finds a sympathetic listener in Ellen, who hears the story of her mother's loss of virtue but still affirms a daughter's love. Mrs. Bruce also welcomes Jacobs back into a discursive community. Jacobs writes, “I had entered this family with the distrustful feelings I had brought with me out of slavery; but ere six months had passed, I found that the gentle deportment of Mrs. Bruce and the smiles of her lovely babe were thawing my chilled heart. My narrow mind also began to expand under the influences of her intelligent conversation . . . [21] Jacobs also finds a sympathetic listener in Mrs. Bruce, to whom she pours out her full heart. She describes Mrs. Bruce as a woman who is sympatric, because she told Jacobs that she would do all she could to protect her. Moreover, Mrs. Bruce does not condemn Jacobs, which renews her faith in communication. She is no longer isolated in her discursive community of one. Furthermore, in the end, it is the word "friend" that ultimately renews Jacobs's faith in

21. Ibid., 169.

language. After Mrs. Bruce manumits Jacobs, Jacobs comments, "God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon. Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred."[22] Language is relative, and a single signifier such as "friend" can come to have a multitude of significations. But in this extraordinary passage, Jacobs holds the word "friend" to a true and untarnished meaning; as she says, "the word is sacred." Jacobs uses her critical literacy to transform language as words can be made sacred by the context in which they are placed, and by a shared sense of communication and community.

Therefore, although Jacobs rejects the duplicitous, individualistic, and coercive language game promoted by Dr. Flint (and by herself for a time in Chapter 25), she does not reject language. Instead she changes the rules of the language game by positing that words can be "true" and that a supportive and sympathetic discursive context can engender communication. Beyond inverting the principles of the master's language game, Jacobs's new rules create a game which is qualitatively different. In effect, Jacobs seeks to replace the master's language game with a language game of her own-one which undermines the master's house by asserting entirely different principles of operation. Jacobs's critical literacy allows her to conceive of a language game that does not reflect the dominant reality but produces a new reality—a new reality in which she can be present to herself, present in her own history. Dr. Flint revels in the production of false

22. Ibid., 201.

discourse, but Jacobs insists that in her language game discourse she must reflect a true reality, a reality in which her own experiences are not denied. After her escape, she is told by a minister that she should not "answer everybody so openly" about her past because it might give some heartless people a pretext for treating her with contempt. Nonetheless, Jacobs refuses to erase the truth in her narrative, she refuses to erase parts of her experience which might be deemed indelicate. For example, in describing her relationship with Mr. Sands, she states that she conceals nothing. She addresses the reader directly, asserting, "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may."[23]

Jacobs also claims to be truthful about slavery and the South, as she writes from her own place within the master's house. "You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks…Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth."[24] Jacobs also uses her true history as an "antidote" to the spread of false histories. She cites a variety of actual texts written about slavery but demythologizes them with her own truthful text. For example, she shows that Northern clergyman are duped into believing slavery is pleasant and even into publishing texts on the subjects,

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23. Ibid., 54.

24. Ibid., 35.

such as a "South-Side View of Slavery"; these texts assure people that slavery "is a beautiful 'patriarchal institution'; that the slaves don't want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings, and other religious privileges." After quoting this false discourse, Jacobs corrects it with her own more truthful and full history:

> What does he know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them.[25]

Like slaves, Northerners such as Nehemiah Adams are duped by the master's false discourse, but Jacobs' text presents the true and horrifying picture of slavery. Many of these false discourses are based on ignorance and/or a selective presentation of details-a selective presentation which creates a distorted picture of slavery. Jacobs counters such ignorance and discrimination with her own knowledge of the truth, of the whole depiction, which comprises slavery. Jacobs bravely admits that if some of these Northern clergy men witnessed slavery and were in the position of bondage themselves, then they would understand the misconception of slavery. For example, if Miss Murray were to see the entire systemic scheme of slavery and not just the selective details which are shown to her when she is visiting among the fashionable slave quarters then her text would tell quite a different story. In effect, Jacobs does make Miss Murray "tell quite a different story," for Jacobs uses Miss Murray's false text as a foil for her own true text.

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25. Ibid., 64.

Jacobs also cautiously uses antithesis to fortify such correctives into her text. For instance, she describes in detail the torturing of various slaves and then quotes a Southern senator's words that slavery is "a great moral, social, and political blessing; a blessing to the master, and a blessing to the slave!" No further comment from Jacobs is necessary because these words, counterpoised by Jacobs' graphic descriptions, seem patently hollow, incorrect, and oblivious. Jacobs presents the entire dichotomy, after which the senator's words are based on a partial, distorted vision of slavery. These concepts demonstrate how Jacobs uses her ability to read and write to promote what Macedo and Freire would call "emancipatory literacy." Applying emancipatory literacy to *Incidents* reveals the "reason for being that is behind the facts, thus demythologizing the false interpretations of these same facts."[26] Jacobs undercuts the master's language by showing that it is grounded in a distorted and selective interpretation of facts. Jacobs uses her own truthful and full text to demythologize the master's false and partial texts. Jacobs is also adept at using reading and writing to reclaim texts the master has usurped; in so doing she forces these texts back to a true (or truer) meaning.

As previously noted, religious discourse is marshalled against slaves, and slaves cannot protest this false use of Biblical texts. When Jacobs attempts to combat Dr. Flint's manipulation of the Bible, she is rebuked:

> You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife ...'I answered that the Bible didn't say so. His voice became hoarse with rage. 'How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!' he exclaimed. 'What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn't like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.'[27]

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26. Ibid., 157.

27. Ibid., 75.

This quote reflects how Dr. Flint rebukes Jacobs for quoting the Bible, but Jacobs's text asserts a right to reclaim religious discourse. In a passage which functions as a strong contrast to Dr. Flint's denial of Jacobs's right to quote scripture, she attacks the use of the Bible to support slavery. She responds to this quote declaring that, masters seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. Additionally, God made all people of all nationalities with the same blood, which means that Africans and Anglo-Saxons are made equally because God did not curse the blood of the African which he created.

Quoting the Bible against the master, Jacobs also speaks to the systemic oppression of race. More specifically, she emphasizes the ambiguity of the construction of race. After all, every man and woman are "made of one blood"-the human blood? This is Jacobs' strongest response to Flint, her strongest and most subversive transformation of his discursive practices. Jacobs thus uses her critical literacy to demythologize false texts on slavery, race, and religion. Moreover, Jacobs's narrative stance acknowledges that there is both truth and falsehood in language, yet still holds her own language game up to a standard of veracity. This violates the language games of her culture, at least as they are practiced by Dr. Flint and others. For her culture's language games use language as a mechanism for power over others, and this often involves duplicity, not truthfulness. Jacobs's critical literacy thus involves not only an attempt to use language, but an attempt to transform language and in so doing to transform reality, to make herself and her race present in history. Jacobs also transforms language and reality by insisting on a communal discourse which is strongly action-oriented. The paradigm for such a discourse

is first presented when Jacobs's grandmother is freed from slavery. Although Aunt Martha has been promised her freedom, Dr. Flint attempts to sell her. In a quite remarkable example of a discourse which is both communal and performative, Aunt Martha is rescued from this sale.

When the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block. Many voices called out, 'Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell you, aunt Martha? Don't stand there! That is no place for you." Without saying a word, she quietly awaited her fate. No one bid for her. At last, a feeble voice said, "Fifty dollars." It came from a maiden lady...The auctioneer waited for a higher bid; but her wishes were respected; no one bid above her. She could neither read nor write; and when the bill of sale was made out, she signed it with a cross. But what consequence was that, when she had a big heart overflowing with human kindness? She gave the old servant her freedom.[28]

In this passage the discursive community works together to free Aunt Martha. This testament that people shame Dr. Flint for this attempt to sell her, while discouraging others who thought of bidding on Aunt Martha. Jacobs follows this vivid detail by describing how the stage for a rescue is set by the communal recognition that this sale cannot be allowed to occur. She helps the reader to hear the feeble voice who makes her low bid while the onlookers are silent. Ultimately, Aunty Martha's freedom is finally sealed with an "X." Indeed, in this odd chiasma (an intersection or crossing of two tracts in the form of the letter X), white interests in freeing Aunt Martha mesh with black

28. Ibid., 11-12.

interests, and she is rescued by a communal, performative discourse. Of course, the Southern community rarely functions in this way, but this incident is a paradigm for the kind of communal (rather than individualistic) discourse promoted by Jacobs's narrative. In speaking of the Fugitive Slave Law and the horrors of slavery, Jacobs attempts to address such a discourse: "Surely, if you credited one half the truths that are told you concerning the helpless millions suffering in this cruel bondage, you at the North would not help to tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which trained bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the South."[29] With its constant references to "you at the north," this passage is clearly addressed to a community of readers—readers who can use their understanding of the facts of slavery to rescue slaves from the yoke of slavery, just as Aunt Martha is rescued.

Jacobs's own discourse therefore calls upon those principles of community and action which she seeks in others. As she explains, her words are spoken on behalf of others to a community of readers who should take action: "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered."[30] Jacobs's critical literacy involves finding a new way of conceiving of language, a new discourse which is spoken on behalf of many individuals, to another group of individuals. She opposes Dr. Flint's "masterly" and individualistic

29. Ibid., 28.

30. Ibid., 29.

discourse with a discourse which is communal and even "sisterly." Moreover, this discourse is sympathetic and redemptive, rather than aggressive and abusive. Beyond the direct addresses to the reader, she also makes direct addresses to the readers' experiences. In trying to explain her feelings about Dr. Flint, for example, she calls on the reader's own realm of experience. She admits that she does not promote hatred but admits that once she hated her master. Jacobs also makes direct appeals to emotions, speaking in a voice that demands sympathy: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another."[31] Often, these appeals to the reader's sympathy involve a plea for the kind of performative language which rescued Aunt Martha: "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?" Thus, Jacobs uses her critical literacy to create a reconfigured discursive community in which language is true, communal, and sympathetic.

The preface of *Incidents,* (which introduces her narrative) also shows Jacobs using critical literacy to transform the discursive patterns of her world. Jacobs makes clear her communal (and action-oriented) motives for writing: her goal is not to promote herself or even to "excite sympathy for my own sufferings," but rather "to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse."[32] Jacobs

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31. Ibid., 55.

32. Ibid., 1.

uses language in a way which is sympathetic and experiential. She does not seek to "master" her reader through tactics of coercion or domination; rather, she seeks to persuade her reader through a "realizing sense" of the suffering of others- through sympathetic experience. For it is only in the realm of the experiential that true understanding occurs: "Only by experience can anyone realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations."[33]

Jacobs's introduction also posits a radically reconfigured language game in which understanding is created through experience, and communication occurs through a sympathetic interplay between writer (or speaker) and reader (or listener). And ultimately, Jacobs places a great deal of responsibility in the reader's hands by repeatedly stressing her difficulty with writing:

> I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is…When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking...I still remain of the same opinion.[34]

Such statements are a common rhetorical device in the slave narrative. Yet Jacobs's appeals are a way of sharing (rather than containing) textual authority. Jacobs has given her readers the hint, and it is their job to spread the message. This stance allows Jacobs to dissipate narrative authority, rather than collecting it or locating it in one place- the authorial self. While Douglass uses gaps in his text to maintain authority over the actual narrative, Jacobs creates gaps or deficiencies in her text to disperse the author's

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33. Ibid., 2.

34. Ibid., 2.

authority, sharing it with her readers. Meaning will be created communally, in tandem, between readers and writer. And *power* means power with and for others, rather than having power over others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jacobs's preface shows her using critical literacy to create a radically reconfigured relationship to language. Yet the actual text of *Incidents* often does not affirm Jacobs' new language game. No matter how much Jacobs' preface asserts her humanity and claims a sympathetic communion with her readers, at the narrative's actual end she finds that, as her own "bill of sale" documents, "women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century." Jacobs still finds herself enchained by a system of political and legal discourse. Moreover, although Jacobs posits an ideal and sympathetic community of readers in her preface, actual "sisterhood" is often absent from her text itself. Certainly, Jacobs is befriended by women like Mrs. Bruce, but the ideal community of readers Jacobs envisions goes beyond her actual experiences. Jacobs uses *Incidents* to appeal to a potential rather than an actual bonding between white and black women. This acclaim suggests that Jacobs's language game is still under construction, which ultimately means that while she is writing it is still in the process of becoming. Critical literacy allows individuals to understand "the social and historical reality, not of a given fact, but of a fact that is ongoing. Reality in this sense is the process of becoming."[35]

35. Freire and Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, 131.

The language game reflects Jacobs's understanding that reality itself is always in the process of becoming; reality is always changing, even as it is being produced. The facts remain that Jacobs must be bought out of slavery, and that she still distrusts many white men and women she meets. But these truths are realities in the process of changing and her practices with language are meant to facilitate these changes. Jacobs's critical literacy, then, does not solve all of her problems, nor does it set her free. However, critical literacy is the necessary precondition for an emancipation of both self and society. Furthermore, critical literacy enables Jacobs's struggle for freedom, her reclamation of her history and her voice. Lastly, critical literacy enables her creation of a future where language and abusive power are no longer synonymous, a future where individuals can be free and active in their own histories-a future where the master's house has finally been dismantled.

CHAPTER IV

REPRESSION AND SUBJUGATION IN *AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

This chapter begins with a critical analysis of Black Liberation Army activist Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). On May 2, 1973, Black Panther activist Assata Shakur is pulled over by the New Jersey State Police, shot twice and then charged with murdering a police officer. She is unjustly convicted and sentenced to serve six years in the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New York. However, she did not serve her time as she escaped from the prison in New York on November 2, 1979 and accepted the offer of exile in Cuba, where she is granted political asylum. Though Shakur decided to retreat to Cuba via self-selected exile, she is still on the FBI's most-wanted list sixty years later. Shakur did not allow the systemic persecution to silence her nor does it physically hold her hostage. She employs literary activism by writing this compelling memoir while in exile. Shakur's autobiography describes the development of her philosophy of social reform and advocacy, which begins in her childhood.[1]

Shakur was born Joanne Deborah Byron on July 16, 1947 in Queens, New York but eventually moved to Wilmington, North Carolina with her aunt, Evelyn A. Williams, who becomes a great influence in Shakur's life as she was a Black Liberation attorney and eventually become Shakur's leading defense counsel. Early resistance is displayed as Shakur repeatedly ran away from home in Queens, which influenced her parents to send

1. Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (New York, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 22.

her to Willington to live with her grandparents and aunt Evelyn. Shakur continues with her defiance to authority and dropped out of high school when she was seventeen years old. However, in her early twenties, she attends Manhattan Community College and City College of New York. During her college career, she became a student activist and participated in rent strikes, antiwar demonstrations, sit-ins, and the protesting of racial injustices.

During the awakening years of her college tenure, Shakur changes her name to Assata Olugbala Shakur, rejecting Joanne Byron as a "slave name."[2] Assata is a West African name, derived from the Arabic name Aisha, said to mean "she who struggles," while Shakur means "thankful one" in Arabic and Olugbala means "savior" in Yoruba.[3] Shakur adopts this name to undergird the mental transition she is enduring as she begins to identify as an African and felt her old name no longer fit. She asserts, "It sounded so strange when people called me Joanne. It really had nothing to do with me. I didn't feel like no Joanne, or no negro, or no amerikan. I felt like an African woman."[4] This name is not simply a change of legal identity; it is a part of the literal and figurative transformation that is ignited through Shakur's commitment to unapologetically announcing her political consciousness in a crypted society.

While not specified in the memoir, is may be safe to insinuate that Shakur understands that power in the African naming tradition and how it empowers one's spirit.

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2. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Basic Civitas Books: New York), pp. 1697–1698.

3. Shakur, *Autobiography*, 76.

4. Ibid., 99.

According to the teachings of African spirituality, "when one bestows a name upon a child that person is not simply naming the flesh of the child, but rather the name is for the person's soul."[5] For Shakur, understanding the origins of shared African histories bridge the gap of lost history for people of color. As such, *Autobiography* can be identified as a cultural resource that has helped to reclaim the dignity that has was stripped from Black Americans through the system of enslavement and government-sponsored police brutality during the Civil Rights era.

In the third chapter of *Autobiography*, Shakur speaks of her childhood where she is initially introduced to the importance of heritage. She explains that when her family lived in the South, they visited Bop City, a popular beach in South Carolina, which her grandparents insisted on calling Freeman's Beach. Shakur writes,

> Throughout my childhood, the name Freeman had no particular significance. It was a name just like any other name. It wasn't until i was grown and began to read Black history that i discovered the significance of the name. After slavery, many Black people refused to use the last names of their masters. They called themselves "Freeman" instead. The name was also used by Africans who were freed before slavery was 'officially' abolished, but it was mainly after the abolition of chattel slavery that many Black people changed their names to Freeman. After learning this, i saw my ancestors in a new light.[6]

This rationale helps to further explain the significance of Shakur's name change. This naming practice emerged in the African Diaspora around the late 1940s and then again in the mid-1960s to 1970s during the Black Power era, when people of African descent adopted African-Muslim names as revolutionaries like Shakur sought to reclaim

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5. Sharon Bernhardt (Samaki), *African Names – Reclaim Your Heritage* (South Africa: Struik Publisher, 2001), 7.

6. Shakur, *Autobiography.* 48.

their African heritage.[7] Among African people, it is conceived that the name an individual bears can exert enormous influence on their general lifestyle and life prospects.[8] As such, Shakur lives up to the name in that she is a "thankful one" who "struggles" for survival through selected-exile.

A few years before Shakur's name change, she experiences another change in identity in April 1967 when she marries Louis Chesimard, who is also a student-activist at City College of New York. However, the marriage is short-lived as they divorced in December 1970. There are not many details about the relationship as the discussion of Shakur's marriage is limited to one paragraph Shakur's marriage receives one paragraph in her memoir. She asserts that it ended over their differing views of gender roles. In *Autobiography As Activism*, Perkins writes, "In a single paragraph devoted to both her marriage and its dissolution, Shakur suggests that her union with Louis Chesimard…dissolved after just one year primarily because they were unable to renegotiate traditional gender-role expectations."[9] Additionally, Shakur mentions that Louis Chesimard expects a wife to be a homemaker, yet Shakur is more interested in the "Black Liberation struggle" rather than "mundane things like keeping house or washing dishes."[10]

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7. Ibid., 9.

8. Newbell Pucket, *Black Names in America: Origins and Usage*, ed. Murray Heller, (Boston, MASS.: G.K. Hall & Co., 1975), v.

9. Perkins, *Autobiography As Activism*, 103.

10. Shakur, *Autobiography,* 196.

As Shakur documents the struggle for Black Liberation, she does not discount the importance for the Black man's role in Black liberation. For example, through her rhetorical choices in describing her pregnancy she acknowledges the valuable role that men play in (re)producing the movement towards freedom. Thus, in feminizing her history or the history of Black resistance she does not discuss her father or her ex-husband in more than a few sentences. Other than these few sentences, she does not speak of her ex-husband negatively nor positively; however, she merely explains how she assumes the last name Chesimard. Thus, one can assume that Shakur is committed to the struggle of empowerment to lead people to both mental and physical freedom.

Both father and husband are often prominent characters in female autobiography, but in Shakur's work their absence demonstrates just how important it is for her to center the focus of this writing about black women's contributions to the struggle for freedom. Thus, *Autobiography* is salient as Shakur investigates an amalgamation of possibilities for gender performance, particularly in explorations of class, race and sexuality during the Black Power Movement. Shakur's experience as a Black woman in America, as a mother, as a member of the Black Power movement and ultimately as an American exiled in Cuba places her in a position to critique race, gender, nationalism, and classism. Shakur's intimate experiences make *Autobiography* an authority in Black autobiography that represents the Civil Rights Movement.

In his critically acclaimed anthology, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (2006), Peniel E. Benny notes that the intellectual origins of Black Power have yet to be properly examined and sanctioned. Benny asserts,

> Perhaps surprisingly, even the era's iconic activists have, with notable exceptions, yet to be accorded in substantive historical analysis. A historical archaeology of Black Power will need to focus on the lives and activism of key figures…whose political activism and intellectual thought has received insufficient scholarly attention.[11]

Additionally, very little critical work has addressed the strategies for the struggle of freedom in African American autobiographical manifestos. Nor has there been extensive study on the significance of place and space in women's writings in the Black Power movement and its lineage from the narrative of the enslaved black women.

Although a small but significant body of critical scholarship has recently concerned itself with first-person manifestos of civil rights activism in the early 1960s, there is a glaring lack of comparative criticism concerning radical Black thought in the twentieth century, particularly prison writing and prison autobiography. This chapter will highlight the autobiographical writing of exiled, Black Power activist, Assata Shakur. Additionally, this chapter will build on the previous work of the Captive African American Narrative (CAAN) by examining the strategies of survival through selected-exile and its similarities to that of self-made confinement. *Autobiography* should be read as a manifesto that is situated in the center a larger collective of the autobiographical canon, which positions Shakur as a leader and a living legacy despite her expatriated state. Lastly, this chapter will shed light on the workings of the American prison system as a site of racial and political repression.

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11. Peniel Benny, *The Black Power Movement Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 13.

Prison Narrative

The notion of imprisonment has played an important role in the genre of African American autobiography since its beginnings in the slavery era. Enslaved narrators severely criticized the degradation of human beings by the institution of slavery. In more contemporary times, imprisonment in African American autobiography has often been used on a symbolically, as in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), showing how racism and sexism of the American society put cage-like limits on the lives of African American women. More specifically, this section discusses the prison experience of Shakur and the events that followed which influenced her decision to willingly choose exile as a method of freedom from the systemic oppression that bound minorities, making it difficult, sometimes impossible to break out of the caste system. Prison narratives like Shakur's shed light on the workings of the American prison system as a site of racial and political repression.

The Captive African American Narrative is an account of the self *and* the collective which produces social movements. According to *Narrative and Social Movements,* politically consciousness autobiographies,

> are social narratives, created not solipsistically but from the wider narratives at hand These narratives may inspire social movements but, more precisely, the dissemination and expression of narratives measure the extent and political success of social movement participants. At times of great danger of reprisal for overt resistance, narratives are told in carefully guarded free spaces…[12]

Consequently, one way to gauge the power of a social movement is to examine the

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12. Francesca Polletta & Pang Ching Chen, "Narrative and Social Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, accessed April, 7 2019, http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195377767.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195377767-e-18.

narratives that leaders promote to their audience. As demonstrated in *Autobiography*, the leadership of radical revolutionaries have the ability to create "a community of memory that may later inspire the leadership of social movements."[13] This research will identify Shakur as a pioneer or a leader in the Black Power Movement as *Autobiography* is the first memoir written by a member of the Black Liberation Army. Liberating autobiographies are narratives that expose oppression and then craft strategies to address those problems through revolutions like sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, education programs, and community activism that are executed by the radical revolutionaries. Authors of CAANs use literature to participate in shaping their own identity as movement leaders as well as establishing a new or revised collective identity for others who participate in the Black Power Movement. Likewise, Shakur composes an identity for the Black Liberation Army; however, this section of the research will focus on the female's identity.

Shakur's autobiographical manifesto helps the reader to understand how she reconstitutes a Black female identity within this new phase of the Black Power movement. As such, this section contends that she uses her own identity as a Black female political prisoner to inspire a notion of Black liberation and to provide an ideological critique of the prison-industrial complex. While *Autobiography* is a descriptive account of Shakur's life as a radical activist, she includes poetry and prose to demonstrate strategies of a revival that construct a renewed Black identity that puts Black culture in a position of authority, revoking the systems of oppression that historically put African Americans at the bottom

13. Ibid., 3.

of a social caste system. These dispositions emphasize the importance of Black liberation history and heroes, while highlighting the feminized history of Black Power and Black resistance through metaphors of (re)birth and sisterhood. Shakur underscores her feminization by employing expository writing including poetry, prose and open letters. Additionally, this prison narrative contextualizes the revolutionary aesthetics of the 1970s and the identity politics of that period. Moreover, it examines the rhetorical strategies of reawakening featured in Shakur's CAAN that ultimately renews Black Power, changing the ideology of what it means to be "free" in a society that holds Blacks captive despite exoneration. Towards such ends, Shakur positions herself as a leader and as a living martyr within the context of past leaders, using a nostalgia for Black Power leaders as inspiration for the activism ahead. In addition, she commits herself to revolutionary action and the politics of self-defense while showing solidarity with Third World countries like Cuba that offer political asylum.

Moreover, Shakur explains the historical and contemporary exigencies that prompt continued action, including police brutality, the prison-industrial complex, the judicial system and false accusations of killing police officers. As a rhetoric of revival, Shakur demands a space in the canon and a place for her CAAN among other manifestos of the Black Power movement. Shakur uses literacy and revolutionary language to describe the history of violence and the resistance needed to frame the continued struggle for survival. Her poems center on the idea of hope, which make it easier for a reader to identify with Shakur as a leader. More specifically the poem titled "No One Can Stop The Rain" states

> Watch, the grass is growing.
> Watch, but don't make it obvious.

Let your eyes roam casually but watch!
In any prison yard, you can see it - growing.
In the cracks, in the crevices, between the steel and the concrete,
out of the dead gray dust,
the bravest blades of grass shoot up,
bold and full of life.

Watch. the grass is growing.
It is growing through the cracks.
The guards say grass is against the Law.

Grass is contraband in prison.
The guards say that the grass is insolent.
It is uppity grass, radical grass, militant grass, terrorist grass, they call it weeds.

Nasty weeds, nigga weeds, dirty, spic, savage indian, wetback, pinko, commie weeds - subversive!
And so the guards try to wipe out the grass.

They yank it from its roots. They poison it with drugs. They maul it, They rake it.
Blades of grass have been found hanging in cells,
covered with bruises. apparent suicides

The guards say that the GRASS IS UNAUTHORIZED DO NOT LET THE GRASS GROW.

You can spy on the grass. You can lock up the grass.
You can mow it down, temporarily.
But you will never keep it from growing.
Watch, the grass is beautiful.
The guards try to mow it down, but it keeps on growing.
The grass grows into a poem.
The grass grows into a song. The grass paints itself across the canvas of life.
And the picture is clear and the lyrics are true, and the haunting voices sing so sweet and strong that the people hear the grass from far away.

And the people start to dance, and the people start to sing, and the song is freedom.

Watch, the grass is growing.[14]

14. Shakur, *Autobiography,* 67.

As a strategy of resistance and revival, the theme of hope is also used as a tool to recruit new members, which is significant because Shakur emphasizes that the future of the Black liberation struggle is optimistic. More specifically, Shakur's text advances an identity for Black America that centers on dignity in the face of white repression. Her anecdotes about her family's values serve to underscore not only the history of strong Black families but also a commitment to Black pride, which provides the basis for Black Power organizing.

Though Shakur is devoted to reviving the movement, she honors her influencers and pays homage to the history of Black resistance that shaped her rhetoric of reconstruction, but which also resonates with the values of contemporary Black families. In connecting her family values and the history of Black resistance, Shakur positions herself as an inevitable outcome of the politics of the Black Power era, while making herself understandable and sympathetic as a leader because her childhood and values mirror that of so many other Black Americans. As described in the beginning of the chapter, Shakur's childhood is the origin of her transformation into a cultural nationalist as she advocates for Black discourses and the Black community.

Shakur also provides a staggering critique of (white) history that underscores the importance of Black liberation heroes, particularly the exemplary revolutionary, Harriet Jacobs. These rhetorical strategies influence Shakur to sketch a history of Black activist's resistance to repression that is both historical (enslaved narrative) and contemporary (neo-enslaved narratives i.e. Black Power manifestos). Black revolutionary heroes like Shakur and Jacobs provide inspiration for the work of the future revolutionaries, while illustrating

that resistance can be effective in countering state violence. Such strategies are essential to a rhetoric of reidentified freedom as the motivation for continued activism in the face of such historical and contemporary oppressions.

Avoiding Subjugation Through Self-Selected Exile

Autobiography illustrates how an imprisoned human being, in particular a politically conscious one, is able to craft out of the prison's space of subjugation an effective field of resistance. Since the beginning of the African slave trade, people of color unjustly entered into a state of subjugation. Subjugation is much like oppression in that one group takes control over another and forces the captured group to submit to the dominant group. Subjugation is one of many types of injustice in the world. As it relates to people of African descent, subjugation resulted in the dominating people robbing Africans of their freedom both literally *and* figuratively. Legalized slavery was a definite exemplification of subjugation: African-Americans were forced to live without rights, under the control of their white owners. More specifically, the Latin root subjugat, means "brought under a yoke." However, radical activists like Shakur refuse to live under a system of subjugation, which leads to her seeking freedom through self-selected exile. This section will speak to Shakur's escape from Clinton Correction Facility for Women in New York and accepting political asylum in Cuba. Like Jacobs, Shakur chooses to remove herself from her family, in an attempt to save her life, while creating a form of resistance to the subjugating oppressor.

Although Shakur is intentionally ambiguous about providing the details of her escape in *Autobiography*, this escape represents a victory against oppression. According to *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*, Shakur's autobiography has become the catalyst for social engagement by a group of Black men and women who have been affected by the hegemonic structures of New York City's Police Department. The Police Department in the life of Shakur and those who support her has come to represent the oppressive arm of abused power of law enforcement officers.[15] She writes her memoir, asserting her identity as a Black woman oppressed by a white male dominated penal system and she strategically uses her poetry and political narrative as a place of resistance, avoiding the subjugation. To this point, *Autobiography* can then be read as representative of standpoint theory although Shakur never refers to her narrative as a theory. Feminist standpoint theory can be applied to the framework of *Autobiography* because this narrative contributes to epistemology, to organizational debates in the social sciences, and to political activism. More specifically, standpoint theory argues that knowledge stems from social position. The perspective denies that traditional science is objective and suggests that research and theory has ignored and marginalized women and feminist ways of thinking. It is important to understand feminist standpoint theorists make three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-

15. Sundiata Acoli, "The New Afrikan Prison Struggle," *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion,* ed. Joy James (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 35.

marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized.[16] Patricia Hill Collins suggests that the standpoint theory resembles "the norm of racial solidarity" and "ground standpoints (that) are situated in unjust power relations, reflect those power relations and help shape them."[17] Shakur demonstrates solidarity by not writing as an individual nor does she write about individual injustices, hence her using the lowercase "i" when she refers to herself. She is very intentional about not exalting her experiences and efforts over the needs of the Black community. She unselfishly documents how Black people can oppose the oppressor through radical resistance and activism, even if it means self-selected exile.

Shakur's chosen exile is an extreme alternative to subjugation. Though exile is seemingly drastic, this form of literal resistance is a significant action that begs one to redefine "freedom." As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, *Incidents* and *Autobiography* speak to the importance of being both mentally and physically free. Furthermore, mental freedom is of minimal value when one is not free from the direct control of the manipulating oppressor, which is why Shakur opts to flee a place of familiarity that acceded to imprisonment and retreats to an unknown land, which offers a safe haven of freedom. Shakur demonstrates the value in the duality of freedom as she successfully avoids a national "manhunt" that precedes her extradition to Cuba.

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16. Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 47.

17. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 201.

To further exploit and misrepresent leaders of the Black Power movement, United States authorities and mainstream media identify Shakur as a "cop killer" for her alleged role in a 1973 shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike. On May 2, 1973, Shakur and two other Black Liberation Activist members are stopped on the New Jersey Turnpike by New Jersey state troopers. After the officers discover guns in the BLA member's car, a confrontation followed. During this altercation Shakur is shot, one state trooper suffered minor injuries, and another, Werner Forrester, is killed. Shakur's wound is immobilizing; however, her companions are able to escape. The first chapter of *Autobiography* gives great detail of this incident without exposing the whereabouts of Shakur's counterparts; however, the media gives conflicting accounts of this incident. As a result, it has always been un-clear if Shakur discharged a weapon that night, a point which supports her plea of innocence. Nonetheless, Shakur is hospitalized for her injury, but severely beaten by arresting officers, and is charged with Forrester's murder.

Despite the corrupt politics of the US, Shakur has favor with the socialist, Fidel Castro who governs Cuba. Shakur's political asylum is done in light of extensive evidence that the former Black Panther Party member (like many activists in the age of COINTELPRO) faces unjust and racist persecution in the United States while being targeted for her revolutionary politics. Shakur remains in Cuba to this day, where she has long maintained her innocence of any crime but that of seeking to overthrow the racist, imperialist, patriarchal capitalist system. For that "crime," Shakur proudly pleads guilty.

Feminism as a Form of Protest

After Shakur is arrested at the New Jersey Turnpike, she spends the next four years in detention. Yet, the trials for the indictments that are presented while Shakur is underground either end in acquittal or are dropped due to lack of evidence. During her imprisonment she is confined to a men's prison, where she is placed in solitary confinement for one year, given inadequate medical attention, and encounters physical abuse. While in prison she becomes pregnant by Kamau, her co-defendant during her New York bank robbery trial. The bank robbery is one of the six criminal incidents that Shakur is charged with between 1973 and 1977. The criminal litigation in these unrelated cases result in three acquittals and three dismissals. However, in 1977 Shakur is convicted of first-degree murder for the death of Officer Foerster, resulting in a life sentence. Not allowing these charges to debilitate her, in 1974 Shakur gives birth to a baby girl, she names Kakuya Shakur. Though intimacy is a crime for prisoners, both Shakur and Kamau disregard this policy. Without offering details, Shakur alludes to them being about to procreate a life that represents a legacy despite the multiple attempts to literally and figuratively kill Shakur's commitment to activism.

Demonstration and revolt come in multiple forms for Black activists. Shakur's radical protest extends far beyond the traditional advocacy, as her daughter becomes a symbol of resistance. Kakuya Shakur's life demonstrates the continuation of the struggle to help advance people of color. Like Jacobs, Shakur maintains autonomy as she risks her own life by loving a man, having an intimate relationship, and birthing a child in prison. The birth of Shakur's daughter, Kakuya Shakur is a direct form of resistance despite the authorities' attempt to control and arrest the mind while having the body incarcerated. She

resists the bodily control that the prison system enacts, and her daughter represents a feminized part of the struggle for freedom. However, simultaneously, her act of rebellion in having a child also naturalizes the role of men in the birth process, thereby making them an integral, though sometimes marginalized, part of birth and rebirth. In becoming pregnant, "she becomes one in the very long line of outraged black mothers…. Here again the legacy of slavery, which separated mothers and children and refused to recognize maternal love, serves as a powerful context to the birth of her daughter. Like the slave mothers, Shakur has to leave her daughter to the care of her mother."[18] Shakur hopes Kakuya will become a legacy in that she will carry on the struggle for survival into the next generation, helping to rebuild and recreate the movement for Black liberation.

Unfortunately, Shakur's incarceration interferes with her early relationship with Kakuya. In fact, Shakur writes a poem about an experience she has with her daughter while in prison. During a visit at the Clinton Correctional Facility Kakuya does not want to interact with Shakur and out of frustration, she begins hitting Shakur with her little fist. The poem reads,

> I tell her to hit me until she is tired…She is standing in front of me, her face contorted with anger, looking spent…'You're not my mother,' she screams, the tears rolling down her face. 'You're not my mother and I hate you.' I feel like crying too. I know she is confused about who I am. She calls me Mommy Assata and she calls my mother Mommy. I try to pick her up…'You can get out of here, if you want to,' she screams. You just don't want to.[19]

This rejection from Kakuya leaves Shakur distraught, which causes her to be saddened, spending the night crying; but creates a determination and commitment to leave the prison

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18. Shakur, *Autobiography*, 108.

19. Ibid., 26.

permanently. Shakur notes this encounter as the breaking point to escape into international exile, though she knew Kakuya could not leave with her. In addition to the willingness to escape, Shakur writes a short poem to her daughter that reads,

> i have shabby dreams for you
> Of some vague freedom
> i have never known[20]

In an interview on Riker's Island in 1974, Shakur discusses in great detail her decision to get pregnant. The interviewer asked, "How did you come to the courageous decision to become pregnant while you were on trial and being held on Rikers?" Shakur asserts, "What we thought about when we talked about getting pregnant was life and the future. All of us related to the fact that we fight from one generation to the next. And I didn't know if I would even have another chance to have a child…. And sitting in the courtroom with all this shit happening it seemed to be the only thing that made sense."[21] This conversation validates Shakur's resistance as she makes a decision to have a relationship and procreate, with the intent of having the child to pick up the torch of moving towards Black people being "free indeed" instead of just being free.

Black Feminism in *Autobiography*

This section will show that Patricia Hill-Collins's theory of Black Feminist thought is evident in *Autobiography*; however, this does not suggest that Assata Shakur identifies as a Black feminist. While this dissertation speaks to the struggle for survival in Black

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20. Ibid., 107.

21. Ibid., 110.

women's narratives, it is not the platform to label Shakur as a Black feminist. Labeling Shakur will impose a personal view of identity upon her, thereby stripping Shakur of her own agency to self-define. This analysis merely suggests that *Autobiography* can be considered as Black feminist thought for its political activism, struggle, community collective and the effort to improve the lives of those under the thumb of oppression by way of racism and classicism. Shakur's own self-definition as "Assata (she who struggles)" and as a Black revolutionary activist woman is key to her autobiography being reflective/representative of Black Feminist Thought.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shakur's work articulates "individual expressions of consciousness."[22] making group consciousness a reality. She is giving a voice to the struggle that is not separate from real people's lived experience. Though Shakur is not being regarded as feminist, an analysis of *Autobiography* is significant in creating the collaborations Collins suggests are necessary between "Black women intellectuals" and "commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African American women."[23] Thus, *Autobiography* can be read as an evolution in which women experience a transformative process to become "feminists" in theory. In "Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff refers to this evolution process as a point when the subject comes to view the facts one has known all

22. Collins, *Fighting Words*, 247.

23. Ibid., 250.

along but in an opposing position, which causes the subject to realize that they are indeed a subject.[24] Alcoff identifies this as "positional perspective." Shakur reveals this difference when she makes a conscious decision to change her name from JoAnne Chesimard to Assata Olubala Shakur. The name she chose demonstrates her different perspective as it relates to Black feminist thought, as well as her commitment to the advancement of Black communities.

24. Alcoff, Linda, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 330–355.

CHAPTER V

COMPARING *INCIDENTS* AND *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

Narratives written by enslaved women have the same redemptive objectives as autobiographies written by women who identify as political prisoners. Moreover, in *Incidents* Jacobs gives an account of her personal journey from slavery to enslavement and from freedom to being "free indeed." Slavery is a condition whereby one is in bondage both mentally and physically, while enslavement is the state of one being physically bound but mentally liberated. Likewise, the enslaved progress from being "free" after escaping from slavery thereby becoming "runaway slaves," living in confinement to avoid persecution to being "free indeed," where they do not live in fear of being apprehended by the oppressor. The aforementioned concepts describe how Jacobs survives and escapes enslavement by redefining emancipation. More specifically, she offers a detailed account of beatings, sexual abuse of Black women, poor living conditions, and master-slave relationships while highlighting the significance of family support on the literal and figurative journey to freedom.

Like *Incidents*, the function of *Autobiography* is to tell the authentic story of Black life while offering the metaphorical tools to dismantle systematic oppression, emancipating the mind of those who are still mentally in bondage by the political shackles of white society. As a growing change agent, I will use this work to further

promote the significance of narratives written by the marginalized Black women who document radical revolution in their memoirs Additionally, this chapter will demonstrate how the narrative of the enslaved is a precursor to the political prisoner's autobiography, creating a place in the canon for the political prisoner's autobiography. Sidonie Smith's *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* traces the patterns of African American autobiography from enslavement to emancipation. "A study of patterns of slavery and freedom in black America argues that all writing in this category was and is motivated by the black man's or black women's search for identity."[1] Surprisingly, the pattern is consistent in many areas which demonstrate that more often than not the Black voice has to be authenticated by the approval of white America. Fortunately, this does not apply to these insistences of the political prisoners who write canonical autobiographies which are accessible to the masses and have the utility of affecting policy from the prison. This study supports the theory that the African American memoir is a legitimate, influential source which offers a guiding light to those who are blinded by the oppressions of European subjugations. In particular, manumission from the oppressor's bounds and constraints is a common theme of the African American autobiography. From Jacobs's enslavement to Shakur's imprisonment, Black autobiography continues to speak for and to the masses in an attempt to heighten the conscience of the Black community by using words to break the chains that were meant to keep it in bondage.

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1. Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood, 1974), 97.

As African Americans literally and figuratively fight for social justice, autobiographies like *Incidents* and *Autobiography* are blueprints for others who pick up the burning torch, racing toward liberation. Though Black autobiography receives criticism, with the question of legitimacy, in *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* Bruce Franklin addresses the foundation of the legitimacy of the prisoners' autobiography. "The earliest type of prison writing was the eighteenth-century autobiographical confessional narrative, often printed just before execution day."[2] It is nineteenth-century slave narratives and the oral traditions of emancipated African Americans that truly sparked the development of prison literature as an identifiable genre. In Franklin's estimation, there is a clear lineage from the plantation to the modern penitentiary. First illustrated by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and the faceless creators of prison work-songs, the art forms of prison resistance originated in the American South. One of the four sections of this work is titled "The Movement and the Prison," which discusses the political prisoner's conscious effort of effect change during the tenure of imprisonment. Franklin also dissects the influence of prison on the writer and the difference between the prison writer and a freed civilian. He asserts that the imprisoned writer writes out of passion and logic as opposed to emotion and feeling. This work also suggests that the African American prison writer can make noteworthy literary contributions. Like the narrative of the enslaved, the prisoner's physical state of incarceration can be used as a level of propaganda, which brings attention to the subject matter on which one is writing.

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2. Bruce H. Franklin, *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 19.

Black Women Narratives: Not Just a Writer, But a Witness to Injustice

This study identifies the Captive African American Narrative (CAAN) as the authority that documents the unjust circumstances Black women encountered from enslavement to the Civil Rights era, while forecasting the changes that need to be implemented to initiate a revolution. Thus, *Incidents* and *Autobiography* are not simply personal accounts of a Black woman's life, these autobiographies are situated as narratives from a trusted eye witness who uses her experiences to encourage, empower, and evoke political change all while selecting to be hidden in a safe place of obscurity. This concealment becomes a sacred place and a sanctioned space by the which the women have the vantage point to confront social issues through self-selected isolation; therefore, imagining a life of physical *and* mental liberation. Additionally, Jacobs and Shakur use the narratives to critique the cultural aspects of hegemonic relations between White Americans and African Americans.

Early critics made accusations that Jacobs was not capable of intelligently articulating her experiences in such vivid detail. Though Jacobs uses the pseudonym Linda Brent, her autobiography is not fictitious like the names of the characters. In many enslaved narratives, fictional names are customary as they protect the identities of the people who participated in the abolitionist movement.[3] Although the book was published by Lydia Maria Child, who also edited it, Jacobs has been confirmed to be the author. Based on written correspondence between Child and Jacobs, Child's influence proves to

3. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Autobiographical Subjects," *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2010), 21-62.

be limited, only providing small revisions. Thus, "Jacobs was solely responsible for the subject matter and voice of the text."[4]

Literacy was one of the primary tools that masters withheld from the enslaved because literacy was the gateway to freedom. Typically, owners kept the enslaved deliberately illiterate or ignorant by withholding simple facts such as their age or real name as a means to exert power and dominion over the captive. In this regard, Jacobs considers herself fortunate because she is taught to read, write, and sew by her mother's mistress, Mrs. Flint. Noted in the first chapter of *Incidents*, Jacobs reminds the reader that literacy is unlikely for the enslaved. She asserts, "While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory"[5] as reading and writing were forbidden because masters of the enslaved did not want the captives to write letters to abolitionists and/or devise a plan of escape. However, Mrs. Flint is one of few masters who taught the enslaved to read the Bible as an act of religious obligation because the oppressor thought this to be a compromise to God for their unjust actions.[6]

Unfortunately, Mrs. Flint dies and when Jacobs is twelve years old, she is willed to Flint's niece, Emily Flint. But Emily's father, Dr. Flint is far more interested in Jacobs, becoming her de facto master. In comparison to the previous master, Dr. Flint is cruel, vicious, and malicious. Jacobs writes, "the cook never sent a dinner to his table

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4.William L. Andrews, "Harriet Jacobs," *The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2006). 171.

5. Harriet A. Jacobs, Lydia Maria Child, Jean Fagan Yellin, and John S. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 17.

6. Jack Lynch, "Every Man Able to Read," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* 1, no. 2 (May 2011): 2.

without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence,…cramming it down her throat till she choked."[7] Like other documented oppressors, Flint takes pleasure in having absolute control by enforcing his will on the servants to make them weak mentally and physically. Likewise, Mrs. Flint is callous, insensitive, and resentful. For instance, Jacobs witnesses her spitting in all of the pots and pans to prevent the enslaved from eating leftovers after the Flints are finished with dinner.

Mrs. Flint develops an extreme dislike towards Jacobs as Dr. Flint becomes obsessed with fostering an intimate relationship with Jacobs. During a brutal winter storm, Mrs. Flint punishes Jacobs, ordering her not to wear shoes again and then orders Jacobs to run an errand in the snow.[8] While Jacobs survives this cruel punishment, she offers descriptive details that portray the master-slave relationship, as this work shows "the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both the enslaved and the master—the slave due to his being oppressed, the master due to his power to oppress."[9] Jacobs realizes that her status as property defined her role in the master-slave relationship: no matter how humane a master might be, he or she could sell a slave with little or no discomfort. A recurring theme of CAANs is the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both slave and master. In Austin Steward's 1857 narrative, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a*

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7. Jacobs, *Incidents,* 19.

8. Ibid., 28.

9. Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *The Southern Literary Journal* 19, no.1 (1986): 79-91.

Freeman, he states, “Such unlimited power. . . transforms the man into a tyrant, the brother into a demon," echoing a truth voiced by Thomas Jefferson seven decades earlier.[10]

Like Jacobs’s vivid critique of masters and enslavement, Shakur provides a critique of prisons and the judicial system that acknowledges the complicated racial history of the penitentiary. Barbara Harlow writes, “The writer in prison has a special role to play, amongst his fellow detainees as well as in the eyes of the prison authorities.” Moreover, the writer in prison is both an eyewitness to the brutality of prison regimes and also a scribe for the inmate community, documenting their lives. The political prisoner writes to maintain his or her own sanity, to record and witness abuses by the state, and to sustain a community of resistance, inside and outside of the prison. As an act of solidarity, prison writing encourages oppositional thought within prisons and, in the case of the political prisoner, can recruit prisoners for reform efforts.

In *Autobiography*, Shakur records the injustices behind the prison walls. She notes that the political predispositions for people of color in the “free” world are not much different for those who are incarcerated. Her eye-witness accounts make this narrative a staple in the Black Liberation Movement and a contribution to the literary canon. Additionally, she evolves from a political prisoner into a trusted political journalist who happens to be prisoner. It is important to identify Shakur as a political journalist who happens to be in prison because she is crucial in building ties of solidarity by uniting the incarcerated women with those are considered free by recording the

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10. Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* (Syracuse: University Press, 2002), 15.

histories of those lost inside of the prison system, cut off from family and friends. Prison journalists forge the bonds of solidarity within prisons that account for prisoners' rights movements, they promote literacy in prison, and they help prisoners with legal problems and questions. Journalists and activists in prison serve an important role in translating prison life for those on the outside as well as for those locked away. Former political prisoner, Angela Y. Davis asserts, "the political prisoner's words or deeds have in one form or another embodied political protests against the established order and have consequently brought him into acute conflict with the state."[11] The writings of political prisoners become the contested terrain between "official" versions of "history" and "justice" as political prisoners insist on communicating to those outside of prisons the horrific conditions of the prison-industrial complex for poor people, women, and people of color. The process of writing in prison is so taboo that its practice is inherently resistant, and it is the building block of prison-centered solidarity movements.

As reflected in Shakur's narrative, prison writing is outlawed because it causes for politically radical changes that result in revolutionary socialism, nationalism of the oppressed, and internationalism were organically interwoven.[12] Both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* are written by revolutionary women whose writings align with solidarity activism. For the intent of this research, solidarity activism will be defined as influence on the awakening to move the Black community forward by not only challenging but

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11. Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 103.

12. Dan Berger, *The Struggle Within: Prisons, Political Prisoners, and Mass Movements in the United States* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014), 6.

changing the unjust laws that were designed to keep people of color in mental and physical bondage.

Shakur's work explains that the oppressive government uses imprisonment and execution as a ploy to silence and suppress the movement leaders, i.e. political prisoners who ignite political change. As the political prisoner witnesses the issues that need change, their writings become a bridge that attempts to close the gap between struggle and survival. The distance between struggle and survival is what separates the captive from being free to "free indeed." However, when the struggle for survival is demonstrated the political prisoner retreats to a place of self-selected exile. As a prison journalist, Shakur's strategies in the struggle for survival rely on this inherent relationship between those in her position that can testify to prison politics, prison conditions, and the masses in prisons who are looking for someone to lead them to freedom, both mentally and physically.

Like Jacobs, Shakur is not just a writer, but also a witness, as she counters the authority and authenticity of state narratives with the critical eye of a political prisoner. She is no more a neutral, impartial observer than is the state trooper or the media or the judge. As Paul Gready notes, "The foundation of autobiography's privilege as a source lies in the insider's intimacy with events portrayed, the manner in which experience is claimed as one's own."[13] In an interview from Havana in 1987, she elaborates:

> And I felt a need to explain to people what that period was all about, what the '60s was about, what COINTELPRO was about, what the Black Panther Party was about, uh, and that a lot of people that were alive in that period are no longer

13. Paul Gready, "Autobiography and the 'Power of Writing': Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, no.1 (September 1993), 489.

> alive and that a lot of kids that are growing up today don't have any idea of what that time was about. And, I felt that what happened to me and my experiences weren't really that different from what happened to anybody else during that period. And you know I felt that some of the experiences that helped shaped me were universal in terms of the black experience in the U.S.[14]

As Harlow notes, "detention and literary memoirs which the prison experience generates contest the social order which support the prison apparatus and its repressive structures."[15] For Shakur, critiquing the prison system must include an examination of the ways that the prison apparatus harnesses labor. She describes refusing to work without pay in prison when a guard demands that she snap string beans. She tells the guard, "I don't work for nothing. I a'int gonna be no slave for nobody. Don't you know slavery was outlawed?" To which the guard responds, "No, you're wrong…. Slavery is legal in prisons." Shakur records the text of the Thirteenth Amendment and concludes,

> That explained why jails and prisons all over the country are filled to the brim with Black and Third World people, why so many Black people can't find a job on the streets and are forced to survive the best way they know how. Once you're in prison, there are plenty of jobs, and, if you don't want to work, they beat you up and throw you in the hole. If the state had to pay workers to do the jobs prisoners are forced to do, the salaries would amount to billions…. Prisons are a profitable business. They are a way of legally perpetuating slavery…. Prisons are a part of this government's genocidal war against Black and Third World people.[16]

Shakur uses *Autobiography* as a literary platform to acknowledge the history of peonage (i.e. debt slavery or debt servitude) and address the fact that prison has provided most of the cheap labor in the United States since Reconstruction. Furthermore, she is very clear

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14. Ibid., 523.

15. Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 48.

16. Shakur, *Autobiography,* 78.

about the consequences of prison labor for jobs outside of prison for people of color. This history of peonage connects the plight of the prison-industrial complex and political prisoners to a much longer history of state repression and centers the prison system as the antagonist that bridges slavery to the petitionary. Shakur's critiques of history and of the racist, sexist, classist nature of the prison system and the state police also connect the brutality of the state against her to a prolific history of genocide against Black America, starting with slavery. The recounting of such race-based brutalities functions as the continued exigencies in the struggle for survival in Black women's narratives. Thus, *Incidents* and *Autobiography* are autobiographies of the sacrifice made for those trapped in slavery and prison, while guiding others who are considered physically free but mentally in bondage.

Redemption in Captive African American Narratives

Though *Incidents* (1861) is written over a century before *Autobiography* (1987), both texts demonstrate how political activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with others across historical periods. Also, Jacobs and Shakur link their personal lives to their political fight in the effort for redemption through a transformation from bondage to freedom by way of self-selected exile. In the struggle for survival, these women construct an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing the difference between being free and "free indeed." Moreover, these memoirs offer a redemptive objective or the reclaiming of rights that have been unjustly revoked. To clearly understand redemption in CAANs, hegemony becomes a focal point as it is a salient concept in evaluating the political forces that contribute to changing ideologies in

Black communities to become independent of the systematic oppression designed by the white, captor. This section will speak to the similarities of Jacobs and Shakur's documentation of evoking change through their personal narratives.

Both women reclaim freedom through escaping from the systems of confinement designed to incarcerate the mind and body of African Americans. In what seems like a suicidal mission ten years after her escape from North Carolina, Jacobs lives the tense and uncertain life of a fugitive slave. As one of her goals in redemption, Jacobs is reunited with her daughter, Ellen. She finds Ellen in Brooklyn, were Jacobs secures a place for both children to live with her in Boston. Shortly after moving to Boston, Jacobs finds work as a nursemaid to the baby daughter of Mary Stace Willis, wife of the popular editor and poet, Nathaniel Parker Willis. Though she avoids being captured, Dr. Flint makes several attempts to locate Jacobs in New York, which forces her to continue her plight towards a freedom that exist without living in fear of being captured.

During the next phase of her self-emancipation, in 1849 Jacobs assumes an eighteen-month residence in Rochester, New York, where she works with her brother, John S. Jacobs. They work in a Rochester antislavery reading room and bookstore above the offices of Frederick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star*. In Rochester, Jacobs is introduced Amy Post, an abolitionist and pioneering feminist who gently urges the fugitive slave mother to consider making her story public. After the tumultuous response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Jacobs thought of enlisting the aid of the novel's author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in getting her own story published. But Stowe had little interest in any sort of creative partnership with Jacobs. In 1852, Jacobs finally receives documented freedom from Cornelia Grinnell Willis, the second wife of her employer. It is important

to note that “freedom, especially a woman’s freedom, is a conquest to be made, not a gift to be received. It isn’t granted it must be taken.”[17] After evolving from being free to free-indeed, Jacobs decides to write her autobiography, which becomes the precursor the political prisoner narrative.

In 1853 Jacobs takes her first steps toward authorship, sending several anonymous letters to the *New York Tribune*. In the first correspondence titled, "Letter from a Fugitive Slave. Slaves Sold under Peculiar Circumstances" (June 21, 1853), Jacobs broaches the sexually sensitive subject matter that would become the burden of her autobiography—the sexual abuse of enslaved women and their mothers' attempts to protect them. By the summer of 1857 Jacobs completes what she identifies as a letter to Post, "a true and just account of my own life in Slavery." Jacobs admits to the Post, "There are some things that I might have made plainer I know." While Post becomes a confidant, Jacobs is still conscious of not begging for sympathy. Jacobs is clear about the intent of her work as she asserts, "I have left nothing out but what I thought the world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out—that she might gain their sympathies." Nonetheless, Jacobs hopes that her book "might do something for the Antislavery Cause" both in England and the United States. To further commence the work, Jacobs employs the editorial services of Lydia Maria Child, a prominent white antislavery writer.

Engaging white abolitionists like Post and Child is yet another form of redemption in *Incidents*. Both women are very influential in *Incidents* becoming a memoir of the struggle for survival that ends in true emancipation. For example, Child

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17. Lietta Tornabuoni, *Federico Fellini*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), 78.

writes a letter to Jacobs where Child admits to being so committed as she, "exercised [her] bump of mental order" on the manuscript, before contracting Thayer & Eldridge to publish the book. However, Thayer & Eldridge went bankrupt before Jacobs's autobiography could be published. With the help of the abolitionist, eventually, *Incidents* is published by a Boston printer in 1860 and in 1861, there is a British edition of *Incidents* entitled *The Deeper Wrong*.

While the antislavery press in the United States and Great Britain praise *Incidents*, it is quickly overshadowed by the controversy of Civil War in America. Though Jacobs becomes a public figure who protests slavery, *Incidents* is not reprinted in her lifetime; unfortunately, it remains in obscurity until the Civil Rights and Women's Movements of the 1960s and 1970s spurred a reprint of *Incidents* in 1973. During the same year, Shakur records a historical message that is the introduction to what provokes her need to flee the country, in search of being free-indeed. On July 4, 1973 (Independence Day) Shakur records "To My People," a recorded statement that is a response to the New Jersey Turnpike Shooting. In the recording, Assata openly describes herself as a Black revolutionary while announcing her participation in the Black Liberation Army. Like Jacobs's antislavery letters, Shakur uses this message to describe the corruption of police, structural inequality between blacks and whites, and the American support of brutal wars and regimes in Cambodia, Vietnam, and South Africa.

Incidents being reprinted the same year as Shakur's noteworthy arrest becomes a significant correlation in connecting these women's narratives, using *Incidents* as a precursor to *Autobiography*. Metaphorically *Autobiography* revives *Incidents*. Yet literally, it is not until Jean Fagan Yellin does extensive archival work that *Incidents*

begins to take its place as a major African American enslaved narrative. In 1987 Harvard University Press publishes Yellin's edition of *Incidents*. Yellin's edition provides Jacobs's correspondence with Child, which helps lay to rest the long-standing charge against *Incidents* that it is at worst a fiction and at best the product of Child's pen, not Jacobs's testimony of her own experiences. Child's letters to Jacobs and others make clear that her role as editor is no more than she acknowledges in her introduction. Child is careful to ensure the orderly arrangement and directness of the narrative without adding anything to the text or altering in any significant way Jacobs's manner of recounting her story.

Despite her longing to speak out frankly and fully, Jacobs dreads writing candidly about the obscenities of slavery, fearing that disclosing these "foul secrets" would impute to her the guilt that should have been reserved for those like Dr. Flint, who hid behind such secrets. In the preface for *Incidents*, Jacobs insists, "I had no motive for secrecy on my own account."[18] While Jacobs has a traumatic, astonishing story, she explains that her struggle for survival is documented in a way by which she is given little alternative but to shield herself from a readership whose understanding and empathy she could not take for granted.

Writing an unprecedented mixture of confession, self-justification, and societal expose, Jacobs turns her autobiography into a unique analysis of the myths and the realities that define the situation of the African American woman and her relationship to nineteenth-century standards of womanhood. As a result, *Incidents* occupies a crucial

18. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 2.

place in the history of American women's literature in general, and the struggle for survival in CAAN for the purpose of this research. Published in the North, *Incidents* proves that until slavery is overthrown, redemption could only be imagined through narrative as "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by a gift, it must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an ideal which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for this quest for human completion."[19]

After being exonerated, Jacobs devotes herself to relief efforts to motivate the people in and around Washington, D.C. to learn their freedom rights between 1862 to 1866. At the height of her antislavery movement, Jacobs and her daughter, Ellen Matilda Jacobs founded the "Jacobs School" in Alexandria, Virginia. In March of 1865, Jacobs speaks to the expectation of the school in what she labels as *The Freedom's Record*. In chapter one of *Incidents*, Jacobs writes,

> I must say one word about our school. While we were fitting up the house, the scholars were very much scattered in other schools, particularly the most advanced scholars. With the new year many of them have come back. My daughter's health will not allow her to be confined to the school. She has charge of the Industrial Department, is teacher in the sabbath school, and assists me in my out-door work. We need another teacher.
>
> The school is making progress under the charge of their teachers. It is the largest, and I am anxious it shall be the best. The New-York and Pennsylvania associations are establishing new schools in Alexandria. All seem to be well attended.
>
> We have three large churches, beside the L'Ouverture hospital. At this hospital, they are erecting another large building.
>
> The chaplain at the L'Ouverture has opened a school for the soldiers. It is well attended. They need a building for this purpose. Could you see the young men

19. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 57.

> with one arm and leg, with their book and slate, crowded into a small room, I know you would suggest something better for these brave boys.
>
> Yours truly,
> H. JACOBS.[20]

While the mother/daughter duo had intentions on making a lasting impact with the Jacobs school, it was dissolved after two years. The school opened in 1863 but closed in 1865 as Jacobs and Ellen returned south to Savannah, Georgia, to engage in further relief work among the freedmen and freedwomen.

After two years in Savannah, Jacobs retreated back to Edenton, where she actively promoted the welfare of the ex-slaves. Throughout her narrative, Jacobs demonstrates commitment and says her help is for "those I loved" and "their unfaltering love and devotion toward myself and [my] children."[21] Jacobs's redemption is not only reflected in her commitment to escape, it is also demonstrated in her devotion to educate, guide, and inspire others to evade enslavement and the aftermath that becomes a lingering stench of injustice towards African Americans. This sense of dedication and solidarity kept Jacobs at work in the South until racist violence ultimately forced her and Ellen back to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nonetheless, she continued her activism in Cambridge where she opened a boarding house for ex-slaves did not have protective shelter.

Conclusion

Similar to Jacobs, Shakur employs her autobiography as a tool by which to carve out redemption, maintain human agency, and autonomy. Though she is reclaiming her

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20. Jacobs, *Incidents*, 41.

21. Ibid., 34.

identity and narrating the story of her life, Shakur clearly identifies her experience as representative of millions of Black Americans and Third World peoples who have endured the same racial apartheid and brutality of the state that the Black Liberation Army faces as they demand an end to the subjugation of U.S. Blacks. Her testimony also helps to enhance her credibility as a leader in the Black Liberation Movement and as one who could (re)inspire Black people to fight for their right to self-determination.

Shakur sees the Black Liberation Army as the contemporary iteration of the Underground Railroad, as it sought to support the Black revolutionaries persecuted by COINTELPRO and other movements that committed to destroying, dismantling, and deceiving any advance for African Americans. Shakur's memoir asserts a coherence that is prohibited by corrupt prison culture *and* forbidden by traditional autobiographical form. In her redemption and reclamation, Shakur defiantly declares her associations and her solidarity with revolutionary causes. Moreover, this declaration is not just for liberation for others, it is for her own struggle for survival and emancipation. Shakur writes,

> No movement can survive unless it is constantly growing and changing with the times. If it isn't growing, it's stagnant, and without the support of the people, no movement for liberation can exist, no matter how correct its analysis of the situation is. That's why political work and organizing are so important. Unless interest in changing you are addressing the issues people are concerned about and contributing positive direction, they'll never support you. The first thing the enemy tries to do is isolate revolutionaries from the masses of people, making us horrible and hideous monsters so that our people will hate us.[22]

Furthermore, this passage helps to underscore the strategies of reconstruction that

22. Shakur, *Autobiography,* 181.

are most visible within Shakur's discourse of Black liberation. More specifically, the emphasis in this essay is on community organizing and political work, which includes building trust among members, while overcoming the nation's demonization of movement participants as terrorists. Additionally, Shakur reminds the reader of the importance in triumphing over the isolation of political prisoners by the state.

In addition to recording a feminized counter-history of resistance, Shakur's anti-imperial language represents another rhetorical feature in the service of reviving the movement for Black Liberation. Shakur also emphasizes her sacrifice for Black Liberation. On July 4, 1973, Shakur is aided by her aunt and lawyer, Evelyn, in the recording of "To My People," an open letter broadcast on many radio stations across the United States.[23] Not only does this fit with the tradition of black manifesto-writing in America but it also emphasizes Shakur's commitment to the Third World, a commitment central to the tenets of Black Power. This letter also positions her as a leader, as a prophet speaking to "her people," Black people. She says, "I am a Black revolutionary, and, as such, i am a victim of all the wrath, hatred, and slander that amerika is capable of. Like all other Black revolutionaries, amerika is trying to lynch me."[24] Shakur directs the listener/reader to think critically about the misrepresentations of the media and she asserts political repression is the modern form of lynching, Awhich invokes the racialized and gendered dynamics of Shakur's persecution.

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23. Francesca Polletta, "It Was like a Fever…': Narrative Identity in Social Protest," *Social Problems* 45, no. 2 (May 1998), 142, accessed April 3, 2019, doi:10.2307/3097241.

24. Shakur, *Autobiography,* 151.

A pivotal claim to the redemptive objective in Black Women Narratives, Shakur delivers "To My People" while she is imprisoned for crimes for which she proclaims her innocence. The physical place of confinement does not contain Shakur's voice to speak on behalf of the Black Liberation Movement. She opens this speech with,

> Black brothers, Black sisters, i want you to know that i love you and i hope that somewhere in your hearts you have love for me. My name is Assata Shakur (slave name joanne chesimard), and i am a revolutionary. A Black revolutionary. By that i mean that i have declared war on all forces that have raped our women, castrated our men, and kept our babies empty-bellied.
> I have declared war on the rich who prosper on our poverty…I am a Black revolutionary woman, and because of this i have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated. The alleged crimes in which only men were supposedly involved, i have been accused of planning. They have plastered pictures alleged to be me in post offices, airports, hotels, police cars, subways, banks, television, and newspapers. They have offered over fifty thousand dollars in rewards for my capture and they have issued orders to shoot on sight and shoot to kill.
>
> I am a Black revolutionary, and, by definition, that makes me a part of the Black Liberation Army...[25]

As demonstrated in this section, Shakur uses memory to help incite a sense of outrage and exigency to compel readers to make connections between the oppression of the Johnson administration and its continuation in the Nixon administration. It is safe to suggest that she is drawing parallels between the lynch mobs of enslavement to the criminal justice system. Such testimony not only helps constitute the collective memories of the violence against African Americans seeking political and economic justice, it also provides the momentum that advances the regenerative efforts underway in the next stage of the Black Power movement, particularly because police brutality and racial profiling have gotten worse, rather than better.

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25. Ibid., 143.

Like Jacobs, Shakur argues that radical revolutionary action is the only way toward freedom and liberation. She asserts, "There is, and always will be, until every Black man, woman, and child is free, a Black Liberation Army."[26] The main function of the comparison of Jacobs and Shakur's narrative is to demonstrate their struggle for freedom, and to prepare for the future of liberation for Black people by any means necessary. Additionally, this chapter seeks to examine how Black women's narratives that were written in exile are a part of a radical social movement that has been understudied. Too often scholars highlight autobiography of the political prisoner without referencing or elucidating the significance of exile in the narrative. Furthermore, the Captive African American Narrative explores the ways in which the political prisoner writes an autobiography from the lens that address the history of repression and systematic oppression, while maintaining political asylum without the permission of the oppressor. Lastly, authors like Jacobs and Shakur, illustrate that a characteristic of the CAAN is for the writer to remain committed to her agenda of advancing the Black community without changing due to the overwhelming pressures of the government who opposes mental and physical liberation.

26. Ibid., 78.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Speaking Through Silence: Captive African American Narrative

The intent of this research is to demonstrate the parallel between the liberation from the enslaved narratives and that of the political prisoner's memoir. More specifically, this work seeks to address the limited study that reveals the reoccurring themes that appear in the Captive African American Narrative for the bondswomen and the female political prisoner. Secondly, this research speaks to the need for a new form of liberation that could potentially become a tool to emancipate the African American community of mental bondage. Thus, this study demonstrates how the writings of the Black woman's narrative functions as an instrument to guard the gates of the African American community, keeping the oppressor on the outside of the gate to avoid the poison of systemic oppression.

Incidents represent the enslaved narrative as it is an authentic portrayal of enslavement, written by the former bondwomen and faithfully relating the author's experiences. Coincidently, enslaved writers influence autobiographies of the Civil Rights Era, helping to shape the dynamics of entire Black Power Movement. Until the twentieth century, this fact alone was inconceivable for many white readers, who would question how an enslaved African American could write at all, let alone write fluently and

persuasively. *Incidents* has prefaces by well-known white abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child, respectively, which attest the authenticity of the narratives and the author's sole production of them. Jacobs's narrative even has the subtitle "Written by Herself," which reemphasizes its authorship. In fact, this dissertation underscores that historians believed that the narrative was written by Child until it was proved in the 1980s that the events were real, and Jacobs was the true author. After concluding the study, it is safe to suggest that Jacobs had the rare fortune to be taught how to read and write by her first mistress.

In order to decipher whether there is a redemptive kindship between the enslaved native and the political prisoner's memoir, there were two basic research questions utilized to make this correlation.

1. What are the common themes between the narrative of the bondswomen and the female political prisoner?
2. How can the Captive African American Narratives, the memoirs of a contemporary marginalized group serve as a tool of empowerment for the Black community?
2. Who will endorse these writings so that they are canonized, creating a sub-genre to educate scholars and the masses in greater society?

The findings in this research provide a greater understanding of why African American autobiography is distinguishable, as some of the canonical works are written from Black female voices that were meant to be silenced and bodies that were meant to be imprisoned, attempting to restrain the writer's ability to think and record their authentic experiences. As demonstrated in *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, physical

confinement does not paralyze the memory, thoughts, or courage of the Black women's will to document a legitimate narrative that address the political, hegemonic issues that plague the entire Black community. The paper should shed light on the workings of the American prison system as a site of racial and political repression. It also shows how an imprisoned Black woman, in particular a politically conscious one, is able to craft out of the prison's space of subjugation an effective field of resistance without changing their personal agendas to submit to propaganda.

Like Jacobs and Shakur, I am committed to advancing the Black community by educating young adults and informing them of what it means to be mentally free from the systematic oppression that continues to thrive long after emancipation. During the final stages of completing this dissertation, I had the distinct pleasure of teaching as an adjunct instructor at the illustrious Clark Atlanta University's English Department. Additionally, I was a Hospitality Instructor for Generation Innovative, a non-profit organization that focuses on teaching underprivileged young adults job readiness skills.

Teaching traditional and non-traditional students has become on the most rewarding occupations I've acquired. During my short tenure of teaching, I have developed a passion for higher education administration. And obtaining a doctorate in Humanities with a concentration in English and African American Studies at Clark Atlanta University gives me the academic exposure needed to evolve from an instructor to a higher education administrator who has the influence to incorporate the importance of autonomy, while embracing tradition. Although not overtly apparent, working in higher education is related to my research agenda, since this kind of work would help actualize the dreams of the enslaved women who wrote their narratives—the hope that

Blacks living in America would someday have the opportunity to achieve their potential via a quality education. Despite the attempt to write Black women out of history, the noted Black women narratives cannot be erased.

This research challenges others to dissect the different ways in which Black autobiography from those detained has strategically become a thread in the culture of America. Although the birth of Black autobiography was falsely promoted as if it was initiated by white abolitionists, Black writers continue to make strides toward creating a safe place *and* space for the Black writer to be endorsed by other Blacks. This work represents the memoir of African American without being completely sanctioned by white America. *Incidents* and *Autobiography* are examples narratives written from a prison, a place that represents broken hope and lost souls. Yet Jacobs and Shakur defy this typecast, allowing their confinement to become a place and space by which to create a platform of activism and resistance. Jacobs and Shakur sacrificed their lives in order to become the faithful caretakers of the society which has so skillfully put them out of circulation. According to the ideologies of the Black Arts Movement, the basic theme of almost all prison conversions is the desire to put the outside world on trial. The world breaks everyone, but some people become strong at the broken points.[1] When a man in prison develops a revolutionary ideology about the larger world, it marks the beginning, for him, of a concern which releases him from the arbitration of his own time and fate and begins to grapple with the currents of another world which can make prisoners and

1. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 1957), 98.

prisons to put them in.[2] It is the rejection of oppression that becomes a reform, which makes the beginning of a revolution that transitions into social responsibility. Perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities for African Americans.

As demonstrated by Jacobs and Shakur, writing can be used as a creative technique of liberation that manifest the dreams of freedom into a reality of independence. As militant African Americans literally and figuratively fought for social justice, many of their autobiographies are blueprints for others who pick up the burning torch, racing toward liberation. Oehl asserts, "In black writing, autobiography inhabits a special position. Ever since slavery, autobiographical accounts by African-Americans have thereby developed away from the classic examples of the genre."[3] This quote affirms that African Americans have indeed started to create a safe place in a genre that will accept the true identity of the African American without the consent of white Americans.

The evidence of this dissertation suggest that published autobiographical works makes the life of the subject open to the public without the restriction of secrecy. It is noteworthy to identify Black autobiographies that were composed during a period of incarceration. Although enslavement and prison do not share the same literal definition, *Incidents* and *Autobiography* demonstrate that the confinements of slavery were very similar to that of imprisonment for Blacks. After investigating *Incidents* and similar

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2. William N. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York, NY: Norton, 1996), 5.

3. Mortiz Oehl, "The Development of the Self-Image in Black Autobiographical Writing (Frederick Douglass, W.E.B Du Bois and Malcom X)" (Ph.D. diss, Purdue University, 2004), 77.

texts, it was proven that the life of African Americans has been exploited and the oppressor has tried to control the Black narrative. Nonetheless this study proves that published autobiographical work of an African American prisoner demonstrates the strides and progress of African American literature.

Thus, these findings support the theory that the African American personal memoir is a significant contribution in Black liberation. Additionally, bounds and constraints are an important thread in the culture of the African American autobiography. From enslavement to imprisonment, Black autobiography continues to speak for and to the masses in attempt to heighten the conscience of the Black community. It is remarkable for a marginalized group to create the space and place for the unsung heroes to be heard and recognized in mainstream society.

The mentioned African American prison autobiographies are informative yet controversial work as they suggest that the truth of the Black life can be the death of the racial injustice. Perhaps further studies of CAANs can prove that virtuous African American leaders used their prison experience as a positive addition to their distinguished memoirs. More specifically, African American prisoners speak the authentic truth of Black life, which can help to destroy the rejection of the Black voice. The Black voice was meant to be silenced but the information in this research is proof that demonstrates that the Black voice can be heard by manipulating the language of the white oppressor.

As stated, Black autobiography was birth from the accounts of slave narratives. It is recommended for one to understand the relationship of enslave narratives and its role in creating a place for autobiography of the African American prisoner. *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*, Sidonie

Smith's work traces the patterns of African American autobiography from slavery to emancipation. "A study of patterns of slavery and freedom in black American argues that all writing in this category was and is motivated by the black man's or black women's search for identity."[4] Surprisingly, the pattern is consistent in many areas that demonstrate that Black autobiography has to be authenticated by the approval of white America. However, this may not apply to some insistences of Black prisoners who write canonical narratives.

It is noteworthy to identify black autobiographies that were composed during a period of incarceration. Although the oppressor does not document enslavement as "jail," the confinements of slavery were very parallel to that of imprisonment. So, the life of African Americans has always been exploited and owed by the white majority. This work speaks to the public influence of Black autobiography. More importantly, a published autobiographical work of an African American prisoner demonstrates the strides and progress of African American literature.

"Sometimes, like some of the slave narratives written for abolitionist propaganda purposes between 1830 and 1860, some autobiographies are written with the collaboration and assistance of a second party."[5] Acknowledging several distinguished Black authors, this text suggests that Black autobiography is rich and varied from slave narratives to notable works by black intellects. Additional research can include gathering

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4. Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood, 1974), 34.

5. Richard K Barksdale, "Black Autobiography and the Comic Vision," *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 2 (June 1998): 22-27.

information from a collective of African Americans from different groups, sects, and social classes i.e. prisoners who publish canonical works. It is important to note that the elucidation of *Incidents* and explore the intensities and denomination that indisputably qualifies black autobiography to be canonical literature. As a movement, its decried colonialism of the European power in Africa and elsewhere and sought to raise consciousness.

Limitations

Jacobs and Shakur's autobiography can be used as a means of educating, instructing, and teaching the masses. This work demonstrates that the autobiography is a supplementary piece depending on the literary lens in which the reader is using. This study is beneficial for research in higher education as the intent of this study is to educate others or ad to scholarship regarding Black autobiography that was written by prisoners. Autobiographical works can have limitations in the messages and stories that the author is trying to project. This notion supports the claim that silence is an important aspect in African American biography which seemingly limits the writing of Black political prisoners. Nonetheless, there is a humanitarian development during his state of imprisonment. In *Prison Writing in 20th-Century American*, Bruce Franklin dissects the influence of prison on the writer and the difference of the prison writer versus a freed civilian. He asserts that the imprisoned writer writes out of passion and logic versus emotion and feeling. Thus, the African American prison writer can have noteworthy literary contributions despite the said limitations. In fact, the prisoners physical state of incarceration can be used a level of beneficial propaganda which brings attention to the subject matter in which one is writing.

Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties analyzes the autobiographies of three black women who were involved in the Black Power Movement in the United States during the 1960s: Elaine Brown's *A Taste Of Power* (1992), Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). As explained in her introduction, this book investigates "the different ways these activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods, their emphatic linking of the personal and political in agitating for transformative action, and their constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing." This is a very appropriate study for two reasons: it intersects with the numerous studies of the Black Power era that have appeared in the last ten years, and it intervenes in the now promising field of American autobiography studies, especially African American autobiography studies.

Though silence and/or withholding incriminating information can be a theme in Black autobiography, this limitation does not change the value in Black autobiography. In fact, autobiography from radical revolutionaries become a form historical activism. For example, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* is an award-winning collection of sixteen essays on Black women's social and political activism during the twentieth century. Though the incarceration is not a glamorous state, it has impacted the life of great African American autobiography. Black writers that have experienced imprisonment usually have a different approach to autobiographical work. For instance, their accounts are received as realistic and appealing to the common man. It is a seminal contribution to the study of African American and women's history. Utilizing "autobiographical, biographical, and sociopolitical analysis,"

the essays trace the evolution of black women's contributions to social and political changes through the production of revolutionary writings.

Recommendations

There are additional areas for further research that have been highlighted by the studies undertaken for this research. These include the additional investigation of other narratives that demonstrate the Black women's loopholes of resistance. Future studies might look for trends in diaries and interviews to explore how Black women employ space and place as a part of author's activism. This investigation would help to confirm, and possibly to quantify the magnitude of how Black women emerge as persistent rebels and insidious survivors in the midst of physical incarceration and depredation. As noted by Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class*, "she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception rather than the rule."[6]

Lastly, it is highly recommended for scholars who teach in the African American Studies discipline to incorporate Black autobiography in instructing courses relating to Humanities, English, Literature, History, or Rhetoric. In teaching Captive African American Narratives, one must be sure to examine cultural aspects of hegemonic relations between White Americans and African Americans, as it is a neglected topic which should provide the basis for African American Studies programs. Traditionally required courses in AAS programs establish culture as the focus of department; however, political and economic forces are clearly important for understanding the position of

6. Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Womens Press, 2001), 9.

Black Americans in the changing social organization of the United States. Exploring hegemony through the lens of Black autobiography could offer a more authentic guide to activism and resistance that has been successful in shaping the Black experience without assimilating to appease the oppressor.

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